

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

*Eternal
Brothers*

DALAKIS
PASSION

N.J. WALTERS

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Eternal Brothers

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DALAKIS PASSION:

ETERNAL BROTHERS

N.J. Walters

Dedication

Thank you to my husband, Gerard, for sharing this incredible journey with me.

Thank you to all the readers who have embraced the Dalakis family and this series.

As always, thank you to my amazing editor, Mary, who works above and beyond to make each book sparkle!

Prologue

The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. Sam Cassidy flicked back the corner of the curtain ever so slightly and peered out into the evening gloom descending on the city of New Orleans. He scanned the street but could see nothing. Nonetheless, he knew someone was out there watching the house. He'd been a cop for too long to discount his instincts.

"What's wrong?"

Cassidy didn't jump or flinch. He was getting used to the other inhabitants of this house taking him unawares. It didn't bother him anymore. After all, they were all vampires and therefore had abilities beyond mere mortals. He chuckled to himself as he let the end of the curtain drop back into place and turned away from the window.

"Something amuses you?" The corner of Lucian's mouth turned upward.

Cassidy shook his head. "I just find it damn strange at times that I'm working for a bunch of vampires."

"Ah, the capriciousness of fate." Lucian strolled farther into the opulent family room, stopping by a wine decanter and pouring himself a glass. The ruby red of the liquid had Cassidy staring hard at it. "It's only wine, my friend. But an exceptional vintage." He picked up the crystal goblet and swirled the liquid around. "Are you sure you don't want one?"

"Positive." He glanced out the window again. "Someone is out there watching the house."

All remnants of humor disappeared and Lucian was standing at the window before Cassidy could blink. He still couldn't get used to the preternatural speed and other powers that Lucian and his family possessed. It would take time, he supposed. He'd been friends with them for several years but had only taken the job as head of their security two weeks ago.

Lucian focused his attention out the window and Cassidy knew he was using his exceptional psychic powers to scan the area. "I sense only normal activity."

"Doesn't matter." Cassidy strode to another window and checked the street. It was early October and, with the night closing in quicker, it was impossible for him to see much of anything. "Someone is watching."

Lucian stepped away from the window. "If you say that someone is watching us, then I believe you. But there is always someone watching us. That is one of the problems of being rich." Dismissing whoever was outside on the street, Lucian picked up his glass and strode toward the door. "Delight and I are taking her brother out for

supper. He's heading back to New York tomorrow and Delight wants to spend the evening with him."

Cassidy watched him disappear back up the wide staircase. Delight Deveraux—well, she was Delight Dalakis now—was the reason that he'd met Lucian. She'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time a little over three years ago and had witnessed her boss being murdered. Unfortunately, the lowlife scum who'd been doing the killing had discovered her and they'd chased her with the intent of silencing her. Fortunately, Lucian had saved her. Cassidy had been one of the detectives assigned to the case. They'd never found the bodies of the assailants and that had led him to look a little more closely at the Dalakis family. Lucian and his brother Stefan lived alongside each other in the French Quarter. Rich and powerful, they kept a low profile in the city.

The crime boss who'd ordered the hit had wanted all the loose ends tied up and that had led to the kidnapping of Delight's then eighteen-year-old brother, Chase. The night everything had come to a head was one that Cassidy would never forget. He'd seen things he never would have believed if he hadn't seen them himself, and there were still some days where he questioned his own mind.

Delight had been shot and was dying when Lucian had grabbed her. Before Cassidy's very eyes the man had grown fangs and began sucking what was left of Delight's blood from her body. He had started to interfere but was stopped by both Chase and Stefan. Lucian had then opened up his own vein and had tried to get Delight to drink. It had been horrifying and fascinating to witness at the same time.

She'd been dead. He was certain of that. But then she'd latched onto Lucian's wrist and sucked. Her wounds had begun to heal in front of Cassidy's eyes. That night had been a nightmare, and for the first time in his law enforcement career, Cassidy hadn't told the full truth. He'd kept the Dalakis family and Delight out of his reports.

After all, who would have believed him?

The Dalakis men were not trusting sorts and Cassidy couldn't blame them. When you were protecting a secret this big, you couldn't afford to take chances. But Cassidy had been thrown into their lives again a few months later when Stefan got into a bit of trouble in North Carolina. Once again, Cassidy had witnessed a Dalakis brother bring his chosen woman back from the brink of death and convert her into a vampire.

He walked over to the large wingback chair that sat in front of the fireplace and threw himself down into it, stretching his long, jean-clad legs out in front of him. The hearth was cold, but the nights were still relatively warm. Closing his eyes, he tilted his head back against the plush cushion. He seen more horror than he'd ever wanted to the past three years and only a small part of it came from his association with the Dalakis family. The bulk of it had come from Hurricane Katrina.

The Dalakis family had evacuated along with everyone else who'd been able to leave the city, but he had stayed. As a police detective, it was his duty to serve. He swallowed hard, still able to taste the stench of death after all these long months. He had vivid memories of the hours following the disaster. Days had melded into weeks of

scouring the city for the dead and survivors as the waters receded. Then there was the criminal element that always surfaced at times like this, preying on the weaker and finding a way to turn a buck.

The experience had changed him.

He'd seen too much, been through too much. In spite of how he'd felt, he'd hung on almost another two years, refusing to quit. The dreams tormented him nightly and he felt as if he was losing a hopeless battle as the city struggled to rebuild. At thirty-five, he'd burnt out and had lost the heart to do the job he'd been trained to do. Handing in his resignation had been the hardest thing he'd ever done. Sam Cassidy was no quitter, but it was either the job or his sanity, so he'd left the job.

"You okay?"

Cassidy opened his eyes and smiled. At twenty-one, Chase Deveraux was the only other non-vampire in the house. Cassidy didn't count the housekeeper who only came in twice a week. He liked Delight's younger brother, who was much older than his years. "I'm fine." The response was immediate, but he realized he wasn't fine. A restlessness filled him and he knew that as soon as the family left for supper, he would be out prowling around the neighborhood.

Chase stared hard at him before changing the subject. "How do you like the carriage house?"

Cassidy had moved into Chase's old apartment, a converted carriage house out in back of the main house. It was large and clean and more than adequate for his needs. It kept him on site where he was needed and it saved him a lot of money in rent. Not that he needed to save money now. The Dalakis brothers were paying him a ridiculous amount of money to work for them, but that wasn't why he'd taken the job.

"The carriage house is great. How's New York?" Delight's brother was a budding artist and, from what little Cassidy had seen, a damn good one. He specialized in sculpture but also dabbled in paints as well. Lucian had arranged for him to move to New York to further his art studies.

Chase's demeanor changed immediately as he smiled. "New York is amazing. There's so much to see and do."

He listened with half an ear as Chase waxed enthusiastic about the joys of the city, his mind still on the threat he felt from coming from outside.

He heard the others coming before he saw them. Female voices drifted into the room, announcing their arrival. Lucian and Delight entered the room first. With her pale blue eyes and short sandy-brown hair, Delight certainly didn't resemble his idea of a vampire. She looked wholesome and natural, more like your friend's kid sister than a preternatural being. Stefan and his wife, Laurel Rose, followed them into the room. The other woman had an ethereal quality about her. With her long black hair and her deep indigo eyes, Laurel Rose looked like she could easily bewitch a man. She was certainly the center of Stefan Dalakis' world. The large man hovered protectively behind her.

Delight smiled at her brother. "You ready to go?"

"Sure am." Chase headed to the door. "I just gotta grab my coat."

"You sure you don't want to come with us, Cassidy?" Delight's offer warmed his heart.

"No, I've got things to do here. You all go ahead." He didn't have to worry about security at night. No one would get past Stefan or Lucian Dalakis.

The Dalakis brothers certainly fulfilled his expectations of what a vampire should look like and then some. Big and muscular, there was an aura of barely restrained power that emanated from them. With their long black hair and piercing green eyes, they were definitely intimidating. The women were unquestionably safe with these men who would not hesitate to kill to protect them. Cassidy took over security during the day when they were all in a deathlike sleep and vulnerable to attack.

Lucian's eyes narrowed as he watched Cassidy. But Cassidy kept his features impassive and the group finally left. The silence of the house wrapped around him and he stood and prowled back toward the window.

Tonight's dinner was for family and, as he had been his entire life, Cassidy was on the outside looking in. He was the hired help, not a member of the family.

That was one of the things that he admired about the Dalakis brothers—family was everything to them. They had an older brother, Cristofor, who lived in Transylvania with his wife, Johanna, but, in spite of the distance, they were all very close. But as much as they were alike, all three brothers had distinct personalities and Sam liked them all.

All three of the women were always kind to him, trying to include him in one thing or another, but he wasn't sure that Stefan and Cristofor really trusted him in spite of all they'd been through together.

That was okay by him. Didn't matter what anyone else thought—he considered the Dalakis men and their wives to be his family. He was closer to them than he'd been to anyone else in his entire life. As someone who'd never had one of his own, he knew the value of family and the Dalakis family was his.

There was nothing he wouldn't do to protect them.

Moving away from the window, he strode through the house and out the back door, setting the state-of-the-art security alarm as he went. It was time for him to do a little snooping around. The darkness swallowed him up as he let himself out through a side gate in the wrought iron fence that encircled the gardens.

Zane York let the shadows engulf him as he watched the Dalakis family pile into several luxury vehicles and drive away. He'd thought he'd be able to forget about them when he'd left New Orleans almost three years ago and headed back to his beloved New York City.

God knows he'd tried to forget about them. Although he was a big man, he had no problem melding with the darkness. He was at home here in the night. It was a trait that

had served him well when he'd worked the night shift as a New Orleans police detective. But he'd given up that job and had been back working in New York when Katrina had hit the city. For a fleeting moment he'd considered returning to his briefly adopted home but, in the end, he'd forced himself to stay away. It was better for everyone, especially him.

But he hadn't been able to settle back into any kind of a life in New York. Questions about the Dalakis brothers plagued him constantly. Were they what he thought they were? He watched the headlights of the vehicles disappear into the distance. Were they murderous vampires?

He shook his head. They were the reason he'd moved to New Orleans in the first place. With his reputation on the New York police force, it had been no problem for him to get a job here. He'd quickly gotten into the routine of his new life and watched the Dalakis family from a distance.

From the outside, they seemed to be exactly what they proclaimed to be—a rich, powerful family. But Zane had heard rumors and he'd followed up on them.

The first whisper of real trouble had come when a woman had been assaulted in an alleyway after witnessing a murder. Delight Deveraux had escaped, but the men who'd attacked her had never been found, even though there was quite a bit of blood in the alley and none of it belonged to the woman.

Detectives Sam Cassidy and his partner, Jean Gagnon, had been assigned to the case. Zane had talked to both of them but had been unable to get much of anything from Cassidy. Detective Gagnon was the weak link in that partnership and Zane had had a much easier time getting information from him. All it had taken was a few drinks at a local cop bar one evening and Gagnon had spilled everything he'd known. Which, admittedly, hadn't been much at all.

There was no doubt in Zane's mind that Cassidy was the brains in that partnership, which only proved that looks were deceiving. Gagnon was smooth, polished and well-spoken, wearing his three-piece designer suits while Cassidy, with his blue jeans and good ol' boy attitude, was frequently overlooked.

Gagnon had told him that Lucian Dalakis had been with Delight Deveraux when they'd questioned her and that his attitude had been very protective. Whether he'd been protecting himself or Delight, Zane hadn't been sure at the time. But now there was no doubt in his mind that he'd been protecting his woman. The fact that they were now married spoke volumes. However, it had also raised Zane's suspicions. What had happened to the men in the alleyway?

Then there was the incident at The Club, a local hotspot, a short time later when local crime lord Jethro Prince and his chief enforcer, a man known only as Smith, were found murdered. Once again Sam Cassidy had been on the scene and it was written off as hit from another crime syndicate—a falling-out among thieves.

But Zane hadn't been convinced. He'd snooped around the streets and alleys around the club and found a drug addict who remembered a large man with fancy

clothing and long black hair entering the club. No one inside the club remembered seeing such a man. That had raised Zane's hackles. The description easily fit Lucian Dalakis.

He'd dug further but had uncovered nothing. Worried about his preoccupation with this family, he'd resigned his job and returned to New York. Then a new rumor had reached his ears a few days ago. Sam Cassidy was now working for the Dalakis family. What that meant, he wasn't sure, but he'd had to find out.

Zane saw the man in question slinking out the side entrance of the garden, searching the darkness. So Cassidy sensed that someone was out here. It wouldn't do to underestimate this man. He was a good cop. Or at least he had been. Now Zane was no longer sure. Turning, he walked swiftly down the street, careful to keep to the shadows. He wouldn't learn much else tonight and wanted to return to his home to think.

He'd tried to resist the temptation of returning to New Orleans, but it was no use. He had to know the truth, not only for his own sake, but also for the protection of the people of this city.

And if the Dalakis brothers turned out to be what he feared they might be, then he'd be left with no choice.

He'd have to kill them.

Chapter One

Sophia Daring had met informants at all hours of the day and night, and in some pretty unusual places, but this was bizarre even for her. She gazed around, trying to see through the gloom and the mist. Like in some low-budget B movie, the fog was hovering just above the ground. The dim glow from her flashlight barely cut through it. Normally she liked fog. Just not at three o'clock in the morning while standing just inside the gate at St. Louis No. 1 Cemetery.

Okay, she could do this. After all, her last name wasn't *Daring* for nothing. She'd made her reputation by being tenacious and unafraid to go after the big story. Up until a couple years ago, she'd made her living by freelancing with the local paper and teaching writing classes at night. But Katrina had changed all that.

As a journalist, she'd stayed behind with some police officers, following them through their days leading up to and following the devastating hurricane. Her work had been picked up by national and international news media. Ever since then, she'd been able to freelance fulltime. There was always a buyer for her work.

Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to step away from the gate and walk deeper into the cemetery. Like nearly everyone else who lived in this city, she'd been here before, but always in the light of day. And boy did it ever look different. Tall, majestic statues rose like ghosts from the mists. The tombs loomed large – perfect places for someone to hide. The paths were uneven in spots and she had to watch her step. The last thing she wanted to do was to trip and sprain an ankle.

A bead of sweat rolled down between her shoulder blades and she cursed herself for not insisting that the meeting take place somewhere else. Anywhere else! But the shrill ring of the phone had woken her and in her sleepy state, she'd barely had time to jot down the meeting place, let alone think to change it.

The hoarse male voice on the other end of the line had assured her that what he had to show her was well worth her time. The story would be all over the news tomorrow and she'd have a jump on everyone else if she came now.

Not for the first time, she cursed her competitive streak and her inner drive. The need to prove herself was always front and center and, more times than not, it got her into trouble.

She shivered and pulled the lapels of her beige sweater closer around her. Tucking the flashlight beneath her arm, she reached into her large shoulder bag and pulled out a mini-recorder. She made sure it was on before slipping it back into the outside mesh pocket of her bag. It would tape any conversation so she could refer to it later, but it was also her preferred way of making notes. Talking out loud allowed her to capture

her initial impressions of a scene or an event. She grasped the smooth end of the flashlight again, for all the good it did her, and kept watch for the first landmark.

The enormous white stone angel seemed to appear from out of the mist, hovering over her, warning her to turn back. Now she was just getting fanciful. Like a kid who'd watched a horror movie while her parents were away, she was freaking herself out. The dead couldn't hurt her. It was the living she had to worry about.

Her sneakers barely made any noise against the gravel path as she turned left and kept going. The night air was chilly, but her jeans and sweater were keeping her warm. Still, a shiver raced down her spine and she stopped and listened. Had she heard something?

"Hello? Is anyone there?" Even as she said it, she held her breath, not sure she really wanted an answer. Whoever else was here at this time of night, she didn't think she really wanted to talk to them.

Her informant had told her that he would be long gone by the time she got here. Still, she was hopeful that he might be hanging around. Whoever he was, he wasn't one of her regular snitches. She hadn't recognized his voice at all. When she'd asked him why he'd called her, he'd replied, "Because you won't be afraid to search for the truth." Sometimes she cursed her newfound reputation.

She glanced down at her watch, using her flashlight to read the hands. She'd been here five minutes, even though it felt more like an hour. "The quicker done, the quicker you can go home and crawl back into your comfortable bed," she muttered. Not that she was sleeping much these days. The past two years, she'd become something of an insomniac, awake most of the night and napping during the day—an occupational hazard of her chosen profession. Then there were the dreams.

When she did sleep, her dreams were filled with strange, erotic images that left her hot and bothered when she awoke. More than one night she'd woke in a pool of sweat and longing, reaching out to a phantom lover who wasn't really there. She had to get out more. It was probably her psyche reminding her that she hadn't even been on a date in almost three years. But relationships were way too much trouble and Sophia had gotten burned more than once. She'd stick with her dreams and her trusty vibrator, thank you very much.

She heard a slight rustling in the distance as she crept forward. It was probably just a mouse or maybe a cat. What was it about cemeteries that made a person want to be quiet? It wasn't as if she could disturb anyone. Still, she wasn't taking any chances that someone else, of the living variety, was out there.

A tingling began between her shoulder blades and the hair at her nape lifted. More shivers coasted down her arms and legs. She couldn't shake the feeling that she wasn't alone.

Stop it, she admonished herself. She was a grown woman, not some frightened child.

According to her informant, she should be almost to the place he'd told her about. She just wished that he'd told her what it was she was looking for. He'd laughed when she'd asked, telling her that she wouldn't be able to miss it. That certainly wasn't encouraging. At this moment, her mind could conjure up all kinds of scenarios, none of them good.

Panning the beam of her light around, she narrowed her gaze to search through the darkness. The weight of the flashlight gave her some comfort. If necessary, it could be used as a weapon.

She was so intent on her search that she stumbled over something on the ground. Sophia pitched forward but managed to catch herself before she ended up facedown in the dirt. She flicked the light over the ground, searching for whatever had tripped her. Whatever it was, it was better for her to move it so she didn't trip up again on her way out. The glow of the flashlight picked up a flash of color. The toe of her sneaker was no longer white. Red stained the leather. "Oh, shit."

Sucking in a breath, she moved the trembling beam forward. The bottom of a pair of jeans came into view first. Biting her lower lip to keep from screaming, she shifted the light farther along the ground. Flesh came next. Definitely female, and she was naked from the waist up. Swallowing hard, Sophia kept going.

The face came into view. The woman was young and quite pretty. Or she had been before someone had slit her throat. The gaping wound was obscene against the smooth paleness of her skin. Her eyes were wide open and her mouth was parted. Sophia could almost hear the young woman's screams as she pleaded for her life. Her arms had been splayed out by her side and both her wrists had been gashed wide open as well. She couldn't have been much more than twenty.

A light breeze whipped up and the stench of death reached Sophia's nostrils. After covering Katrina, she was well aware of what death smelled like. The acrid scent was something you never truly forgot, something that never truly left you.

Stumbling back, she was brought up solid against a headstone. Leaning over the side, she lost the contents of her stomach. For once, she was grateful she'd missed supper. Swiping her hand over her mouth, she leaned against the stone and concentrated on taking several deep breaths through her mouth and not her nose. The last thing she wanted was to breathe in more death through her nostrils.

"Oh God. Oh God. Oh God." She didn't know if she was praying for the unfortunate soul on the ground or for herself because she knew as sure as she was standing here that she'd be seeing that young woman's face in her dreams for the rest of her life.

Shoving her hand into her sweater pocket, she jerked out her cell phone and dialed. When the police dispatcher answered, Sophia quickly gave her name and location. Although the dispatcher wanted her to stay on the line, she hung up her phone and returned it to her pocket.

The need to do something for this girl, anything at all, burned in her gut. She made a pledge then and there that she'd find out who murdered her in such a brutal fashion. Had the murderer been the one who called her? She'd have to turn over her answering machine tape to the police. After she'd made a copy for herself, of course.

Forcing herself to move, she took a step closer to the body. She knew better than to compromise the crime scene, but she wanted to take notes before she forgot anything. Some people might find it morbid, but Sophia knew that the best way to help this woman was to bring her murderer to justice. Before the next day was gone, Sophia would know a lot more about this unknown woman. Their lives were now entwined and there was no changing that fact.

Walking in a circle, she made note of how the victim was laid out, what she was and wasn't wearing, the wounds to the neck and wrists and the lack of blood on the ground. Even though her hands shook, she rummaged around in her bag until she found her digital camera and managed to take a few shots. Not that she'd ever forget this scene as long as she lived, but she didn't want to trust that her memory would retain all the little details. And one never knew when a tiny shred of evidence might make the difference in solving the crime. As she returned to the victim's feet, she saw a piece of paper sticking out from beneath her body. It fluttered in the breeze like a white banner, taunting her.

Chewing on her bottom lip, she glanced at the path and then back at the body. Sirens were screaming in the distance and Sophia knew that within the next five minutes this cemetery would be teeming with cops and the forensic team and she'd be escorted away and interviewed. They'd never tell her what was on that note.

Maybe it was nothing more than a piece of garbage. "Yeah, like you believe that," she muttered as she gingerly stepped forward. Leaning down, she gripped the paper between the tips of two fingers and tugged. Sighing with relief when it came away easily, she took a step back and shone her flashlight on it.

The paper was heavy vellum and the writing was stylized scrip. Certainly not garbage. It contained only two words. She read it twice, but it still made no sense. "Dalakis. Revenge." She said the words out loud. What did they mean? Which Dalakis did the note refer to and what did he want revenge for?

Footsteps pounded on the path, jolting her back to the situation at hand. She knew she had to hand the piece of paper over to the police. It was the right thing, the only thing, to do. She was already in enough trouble as it was for moving it, probably ruining any fingerprints that might be on it. If nothing else, she'd contaminated the crime scene. Even as she reasoned it out, she knew she wouldn't do it. All her instincts were screaming at her to keep quiet about the note, at least for now. Her instincts had kept her alive in more than one dangerous situation and she trusted them now. Knowing it was wrong, even criminal, she shoved the paper into her pocket as she shone her light toward the shouts. "Here. I'm down here."

The first officer to come into view glanced at her and then at the body spread across the ground. Luckily for her it was Robert Cuthbert, an officer she knew, or she might

have found herself quickly arrested. "Daring." He propped his hands on his waist and glared at her. "I might have known it was you when dispatch said a woman had reported a dead body."

Sophia shrugged. "What can I say? Some girls have all the fun." Her words were filled with bravado even as her stomach roiled.

His gaze softened as he shook his head at her. The clearing filled up with professionals here to do their job, and now that she was no longer alone, her legs began to tremble and her head began to spin.

Officer Cuthbert reached out and took her by the arm. "Why don't you come with me back to the station? We'll get you a cup of coffee and you can tell us how you came to be here."

She tipped her head up to the night mist, letting it wash over her face. Her skin felt flushed and her stomach slightly ill. She definitely didn't want any coffee, but she'd have it all the same. They'd expect it of her. If she had any hope in hell of getting even the minutest of details from the cops, she'd have to act like the professional she professed to be.

As they made their way back to the cemetery gate, Sophia took a deep breath. "It all started with a phone call."

Zane stood several hundred feet away in the shadow of a large tomb and watched as the uniformed officer led the woman away. His fingers curled into the stone as pure, jealous rage washed over him. He wanted to rush over to the officer and rip his hand off the woman's arm.

She belonged to him.

He shook his head and forced himself to breathe. What the hell was the matter with him? She was just an ordinary woman and one he'd never seen before. Why was she able to bring out these feelings of possessiveness in him?

His eyes narrowed as he heard her speak. The sound of her voice washed over him, caressing his skin as it seeped into the very marrow of his bones. Every cell in his body went on alert, his muscles tightening painfully. His cock stirred and thickened, pressing against the zipper of his jeans. His instincts urged him to grab the woman and whisk her from this place of death, locking her away from the rest of the world. Lust pounded through his veins, a primal rhythm that threatened to overwhelm him. She was so much smaller than he was, her bones more slender and fragile.

He needed to protect her.

Releasing his death grip on the tombstone, he took a step back and scrubbed his hands over his face. Mist clung to his skin, making it feel clammy. He had to get control over himself. Whoever the woman was, she was obviously a danger to him. That meant he had to find out everything there was to know about her.

That wouldn't be a problem. He wasn't without certain skills, plus he still had a lot of contacts on the police force. By dusk tomorrow night, he'd know everything there was to know about her. He'd figure out why she was here and how she was involved in this gruesome murder. Once that was done, he could dismiss her from his mind.

Simple.

He ignored the twinge in his gut that told him that it would be easier said than done. He watched as she vanished from view and had to force himself not to chase her. An emptiness grew deep inside him, making him ache in ways he never had before. Every instinct that he had was screaming at him not to let her disappear in the company of another man.

Is this what his father had felt like when his mother had lost her mind? Zane wondered. Was it this overwhelming void that had driven his father mad, eventually turning him into a monster that had to be destroyed?

Zane had seen what love and relationships could do to a man and he wanted no part of it. Whoever this woman was, he'd find out what he needed to know about her and then stay as far away from her as possible.

Even as he finished that thought, his ears were still tuned to the woman in the distance. He listened hard, but he heard nothing but the sound of a car pulling away. They were taking her to the station for questioning. She would be safe for the rest of the night.

Not that he cared. She was nothing to him.

His gut clenched and he broke out into a sweat at the thought of never seeing her again. Although he might wish otherwise, that woman was nothing to him and she was part of whatever had happened here tonight.

Swearing beneath his breath, he forced himself to slink closer to the crime scene where he watched and listened as they processed the body. He wasn't sure what exactly had occurred in the cemetery tonight, but he'd been drawn here by pure instinct and the scent of fresh blood. Perhaps it was the unknown woman who had pulled him here. Whatever it was, it was important to him and he wouldn't rest until he knew why.

Chapter Two

Less than twenty-four hours later, Zane stood in the shadows outside an older Victorian-style home that had been converted into three separate apartments. Sophia Daring lived in the smallest apartment on the top floor. He repeated her name silently in his mind. She didn't look like a Sophia. Someone with that name should be dark-haired with sloe eyes and pouty, red lips. That was nothing like the woman he'd trailed to the police station last night.

After he'd finished at the crime scene, he'd made his way back to the station. Using his contacts, he'd found out who she was and had been surprised to find out that she was a reporter. That was the last thing he needed in his life. His business was his own, and he certainly didn't want to read about it in the evening news. It complicated an already messy matter.

But the cops he'd talked to had spoken of her with a grudging respect. They might not like reporters in general, but they at least put Sophia a step ahead of the rest of the pack. He'd heard some stories of how she'd stayed behind when the city had been in peril, how she'd helped them rescue some folks stranded by the hurricane and, later, pull bodies out of homes.

He'd lurked in the shadows studying her, watching as she was questioned for several hours. He figured she was about five foot six and one hundred and twenty pounds. Zane had always been drawn to women with voluptuous curves, but he'd been unable to tear his eyes away from Sophia, with her slender build and slim hips. Even her breasts were compact, less than a handful. His experienced eye told him she was a B-cup, but just barely. Her torso was short, her legs long. All the better to wrap around his hips as he pounded into her.

But it was her face that really drew him. She reminded him of a picture of a fairy princess from a book that he remembered his mother reading to him when he was just a child. Her hair was a deep shade of red that was cut so short it stood up in spikes on the top of her head, and it looked as if she made a habit of running her fingers through it. Her nose was pert and he'd bet his life's savings that she had at least a few freckles sprinkled across it. Her lips were rosy and surprisingly full, begging a man to nibble on them before he kissed her. Her forehead was high, her cheeks prominent and her chin was narrow and slightly pointed, jutting out at a stubborn angle.

Her eyes were huge in her small face and her lashes looked almost too heavy for her. He would have thought them false except she wasn't wearing any other makeup that he could see. What he really wanted was to see the color of those amazing eyes, but she'd never looked in his direction.

She never lost her cool throughout the long, relentless questioning. Although, near the end, he could see she was tiring. Once again, he'd been filled with an unrelenting urge to whisk her away and tuck her into bed, preferably with her stretched naked beneath him.

He bit back a groan at the memory and glanced down at the front of his black jeans. Sure enough, he was as hard as a spike again. What was it about this particular woman that sent his hormones into overdrive?

It wasn't as if she was overly beautiful. He'd dated and slept with some exceptionally gorgeous women in his lifetime, but none of them had made him feel the way Sophia did. He had a feeling that nothing would satisfy him until he'd touched and tasted every inch of her delectable body. His breathing increased as he imagined thrusting deep into her hot, wet core. His cock flexed against his zipper, demanding release. Swearing, he reached down and adjusted himself, but it didn't help.

Tipping his head back against the cool stone of the wall that surrounded the house, he took a deep breath and slowly released it. This wasn't good. He needed all his control. Especially now.

He'd had to leave the station house before they were finished questioning her. He hadn't wanted to, but it couldn't be helped. But what little he'd managed to glean about the ongoing investigation hadn't been good. The victim from the cemetery had been drained of blood.

His gut was telling him that the Dalakis brothers had to be involved in this mess somehow. His instincts had led him to the scene of the crime last night and to Sophia. Now it was up to him to discover just how she was involved in this whole mess. He hoped, for her sake, that she was just an innocent bystander who had been dragged into this. But once again, his gut was telling him that she, like him, was here for a reason.

Pushing away from the wall, he headed toward the front door. It was time to talk to Ms. Daring.

Sophia stared at the far wall in her office. A large corkboard dominated the center, and it was now filled with pictures and reports. The young woman now had a name. Janice Barton had been a fulltime student, studying to be a teacher. Now she'd never have a chance to finish. She'd volunteered at a soup kitchen once a month, was well liked by her teachers and her friends and had left behind a family who was grieving deeply.

Turning away, Sophia dug the heels of her hands into her burning eyes. She'd only had a couple of hours' rest in the last forty-eight hours, and those few had come before the phone call last night. But every time she closed her eyes, the gruesome scene from the cemetery filled her mind. She could forget about rest, at least for now. Work was the answer. She'd work until she was too exhausted to think any longer. Hopefully then she'd fall into a stupor and sleep for at least a few hours.

She'd gotten home just after dawn this morning and had immediately written up a story. It had been front-page news in all today's papers, and not just locally. Sophia now had several contracts for follow-up pieces. Sometimes how she made her living sucked, but it was what she did, who she was. What she really wanted to do was to bring Janice Barton some peace by finding out who had done this to her.

Shuffling out of the room, the long ears of her puppy-dog slippers dragging on the hardwood floor, she made her way to the kitchen. She hadn't really eaten all day either. Didn't really want anything now. But she knew that she needed fuel if she expected her body to keep functioning properly.

The shower she'd had when she'd finally gotten home just after six this evening had revived her slightly. Once she'd toweled off, she'd yanked on her cotton drawstring pajama bottoms and a matching pink tank top and gone straight to her office. Now, two hours later, she was no further ahead and her stomach was complaining loudly.

Opening the refrigerator door, she peered inside. Not much to choose from here. She'd forgotten to get groceries. Again. There was a partial bottle of mayonnaise, some French salad dressing, a part of a block of butter and a container of milk that she knew had been there way too long.

The cupboard was no better—a partial box of cereal, some stale crackers, a can of tuna and a jar of peanut butter. Slamming the door shut, she reached for the phone, making her decision. Takeout it was. Dialing by rote, she tapped her foot against the floor as she listened to the rings. A harried-sounding young man answered on the sixth ring. Sophia quickly ordered a large pizza with the works. She figured that way she'd have leftovers, so that took care of tomorrow's food as well. Hanging up the phone, she decided to try to relax while she waited for her supper to be delivered.

Padding into the tiny living room, she sank her tired bones down into her favorite chair. It was slightly rounded in shape, covered in plush blue velvet and was incredibly comfortable. Sophia liked it because it was large enough for her to curl up in.

She'd placed a table alongside it and a reading lamp behind it. She'd passed many an evening reading or doing a crossword or just relaxing. And how pathetic was that, she thought as she drew her legs up and wrapped her arms around them. She really didn't have much of a social life. But then again, she never had. Social interaction wasn't easy for her. She felt awkward and gawky, just as she had since she was a child. Give her work any day. When she was working, she had no trouble talking to people. Of course, she wasn't really talking to them—more like just questioning them.

Tilting back her head, she closed her eyes and let out a huge sigh. She was too tired for such introspection. Besides which, she'd been through it all before and had come to terms with who she was. Two failed relationships had taught her that she was better off on her own.

Reaching up behind her, she started to pull down the thick blue throw blanket that was draped across the back of the chair. Before she could do more than touch the corner of it, a loud, authoritative thump came on her front door.

She frowned as she uncurled her legs and pushed her tired body out of the chair. It was too soon for the delivery guy. The more she thought about it, the more it sounded like a cop's knock. Cops had their own way of announcing themselves.

She hoped it wasn't the detectives in charge of the case with more questions. She'd had enough questions last night and again this afternoon when she'd taken her answering machine tape in to them. She'd thought Detective Simpson was going to blow a vein in his forehead, his face had gotten so red. Maybe she should have mentioned the tape, but she'd wanted to make sure she'd had a copy for herself first.

Then there was the question of the note she'd taken from the crime scene last night. It had been pure instinct that had made her shove the note in her pocket. She wasn't sure why she'd kept quiet about it, but she had. Now she was guilty of withholding evidence, but she still wasn't sure what she was going to do about it.

Ever cautious, she grabbed her cell phone out of her purse where it sat on the small hutch situated just inside the front door. After what she'd seen last night, it would be stupid not to be careful. She still had no idea if the person who'd called her had been the murderer, but the police thought it was likely. With her finger on the speed dial for the cops, she looked through the peephole.

"Who is it?" Whoever was out there was standing to one side of the door so she couldn't see them.

"My name is Zane York. I'm a cop."

So she was right. Sophia leaned her head against the hard surface of the door and cursed softly. She *so* did not need this right now. Glancing down at her less than professional attire, she sighed. "This isn't a good time." Maybe he'd go away.

"I won't stay long. I just have a few questions."

Nope, he definitely wasn't going to go away. Knowing that she really had no choice, she undid all the locks and dragged the door open. "I didn't think you guys had any questions left that you hadn't..." The word "asked" was lost as her mouth dropped open and she stared at the man standing outside her door.

Gorgeous was just too weak a word. Primal, maybe. Dangerous, definitely. Her gaze roved upward. He had to be almost a foot taller than her. Okay, maybe that was a stretch, but not by much. He was just so darn big that he appeared huge. The man was definitely a couple of inches over six feet. His shoulders seemed to fill the entire doorway and stretched the seams of his tight black T-shirt.

His face was a work of art. His cheekbones were high, his jaw was strong, but not quite square. He had full lips that were set in a serious line. His hair was as black as a raven's wing and looked just as soft. It was cut short, but she wanted to run her fingers through it. His eyes were a surprise. A muddy brown in color, they didn't seem to suit the rest of his face, but his lashes were black and thick.

There was an animal magnetism that seemed to roll off the man, a barely suppressed need for action that pulsed just below the surface. He sighed, waiting not

quite patiently as she perused him. Too bad. He'd have to wait. Speaking was beyond her at this moment.

She caught a whiff of him and almost moaned with pleasure. Damn, he smelled fantastic. She wanted to bury her face in the curve of his neck and just inhale. She'd never had this kind of immediate reaction to any man in her entire life. At least not to any living, breathing man. The phantom lover in her dreams was a whole other story. He was the only other man she'd ever had this kind of reaction to and he wasn't real. Pheromones, yeah, that was it. It had to be pure chemistry. If she could bottle whatever this man exuded, she could make a fortune. The urge to tear off her clothes, throw herself onto the floor and offer herself to this man was almost overwhelming.

Her breathing was getting shallower and she felt slightly dizzy. Her breasts were swollen and aching, the tips hard pebbles pressing against the thin fabric of her tank top. But it was nothing compared to the throbbing heat between her thighs. She wanted to arch her hips against the hardness pressing against the front of his jeans. Oh yeah, he was as aroused as she was. And from what she could see, he had a rather impressive bulge there. Liquid trickled down her inner thigh as her pussy lips softened and thickened.

She'd certainly never seen this man before. A woman would never forget a man this hot.

Like a bucket of cold water, her thoughts finally permeated her muddled brain. She didn't know this man, hadn't spoken to him at the station. Hadn't even seen him there.

Fear surged through her bloodstream. She slammed the door, but it was too late. His large, booted foot jammed into the opening. Remembering the phone in her hand, she hit the speed dial even as he pushed the door open.

Sophia turned to run, but he was on her before she could take one step. He calmly pried the phone from her fingers, turned it off and tossed it onto the table. Nudging the door closed with his foot, he stared down at her.

Terror gave her strength and she began to struggle and kick, damning her soft puppy-dog slippers when they did absolutely no damage against his thick shins. She opened her mouth to scream.

His mouth came down over hers, absorbing her small cry, drinking it into him. His lips were warm and soft as they covered hers and her struggles lessened. He captured her hands easily and held them over her head as he pushed her up against the wall. His body covered hers and she could feel his hard erection pressing against her stomach.

She whimpered – part fear, part desire. What was wrong with her? She should be fighting and kicking. Instead, all she wanted to do was to sink into this man, take him into her body and give him everything he asked for.

He eased his mouth from hers and she almost cried out at the lack of contact. As kisses went, it really hadn't been much more than his lips touching hers. At no time had he even tried to deepen the embrace. Still, it had devastated her senses. This man was dangerous in more ways than one.

"Shh," he whispered as he nuzzled the sensitive skin of her neck just behind her ear. "I won't hurt you. I would never hurt you." Sophia stilled, sensing not just the sincerity, but also the pledge behind his words. "I promise, I'm a cop and I just want to talk."

"I don't know you." Her voice wasn't her normal no-nonsense tone. She sounded breathy, almost sultry. She cleared her throat. "Who are you?" She knew he'd said his name but, as muddled as she felt right now, she couldn't remember it.

He leaned back, which pressed his erection even tighter to her stomach. She fought the urge to hook her leg over his hip and grind her pelvis against his.

"My name is Zane York and I want to talk to you about what you saw last night." He slowly released her hands, running his fingers over the insides of her arms. He traced her collarbone and downward between her breasts before taking a step away from her.

He stared at her nipples where they poked against the thin cotton fabric of her top. Sophia realized she was just standing there with the backs of her hands still pressed against the wall even though he was no longer holding her. It had to be the lack of sleep that was making her act this way. Lowering her arms, she crossed them over her chest. Not that she had much to cover, but it was the principle of the thing.

"I need to go get dressed," she muttered. She needed the protective armor of her clothing to face this man.

She turned to head to the bedroom, but he stopped her in her tracks without even touching her. "Please," he whispered softly. "I just want to talk." Reaching into the back pocket of his jeans, he drew out a slim leather wallet and opened it, displaying a badge.

Leaning closer, she stared at it, her eyes narrowing. "That says you're a New York cop." She took a cautious step backward, although where she thought she was going, she didn't know. He was already inside her apartment and had had plenty of opportunity to hurt her if that was his intention. "Why is a New York cop interested in a death in New Orleans?"

"Now that's the question, isn't it?"

Chapter Three

Zane stared at Sophia, unable to tear his gaze away from her as he slipped his badge back into his pocket. He could see the caution tinged with distrust as she narrowed her eyes, studying him. Pale green. Her eyes were the softest pale green he'd ever seen, making her appear even more like a fairy from a child's book of tales. But if she was a fairy, she was damn sure the queen. There was nothing soft or ethereal in the way she regarded him. If she'd had the strength, he was sure he'd be out on his ass right now. He rubbed his fingers over his face, hiding a grin behind his hand.

Her eyes narrowed further as if she suspected he was laughing at her, but she said nothing. He'd been right about her lips. They were soft and plump and he'd barely resisted the impulse to nip at them. Instead he'd contented himself with just touching them with his tongue, tasting them with his mouth. As kisses went, it had barely gotten started, but it had been the most erotic kiss of his entire life.

"Why don't we sit down?" He kept his voice low, unthreatening. His eyes were drawn to where her arms were still crossed over her chest. When he'd had her pressed back against the wall, he'd felt the hard nubs of her breasts pressing against his chest. He wanted to strip that thin tank top over her head and feast on her flesh. She wasn't very large, but he had a feeling that she'd be very sensitive. He wanted to know if her nipples were the same dusky pink as her lips.

"Let's not," she snapped, dropping her arms by her side. "Have a good look, ask your questions and then get out."

He knew she'd meant to make him feel guilty or ashamed for staring at her chest, but he felt neither of those things. Instead, taking her at her word, he took his time, slowly perusing her body from top to bottom. His eyes burned as he studied the V at the top of her thighs. Was she wet for him? He'd bet anything that if he slipped his hands inside her drawstring pants and pushed aside her panties, he'd find her soft folds slick with need.

"Oh, for God's sake, is this junior high?" The disgust in her tone brought his gaze back to hers.

He shrugged, totally unrepentant. "You offered." Her cheeks were tinged a light red and he realized that she was blushing. He'd been right about the freckles too. She only had a couple, but they were there, scattered like fairy dust on either side of her nose.

"We both know there's not much to see, so can we get on with the questions?" Turning on her heel, she spun around and stomped over to a chair in the corner. At least she tried to stomp. It wasn't easy for a woman to stomp when she was wearing soft slippers with, if he wasn't mistaken, puppy-dog heads.

"I beg to differ." He sauntered into the room behind her and sat on the low coffee table in front of her. "There is definitely plenty to see and most of it is quite spectacular." He had no idea why he was teasing her, flirting with her in this way. Not only was it totally inappropriate, but it was also totally out of character for him. There was something inside him that wanted her to know just how beautiful he found her. Somehow he knew that she hadn't heard those words much in her lifetime and that was a crime. There was something about her that left him feeling almost lightheaded with need.

She snorted at him as she sat back and crossed her legs. Leaning her elbows on the arms of the chair, she steeped her fingers and eyed him thoughtfully. "Is this related to any case in New York?"

He could almost see the wheels of her head turning and knew she was thinking serial killer. He shook his head. "Nope. I used to be a cop here and this is of personal interest to me."

Her face paled and she leaned forward. "Were you a friend of the victim?"

Her immediate sympathy made his stomach clench. "No." He shook his head again. "But I think it might be related to some other incidents that happened several years ago."

"Tell me." All signs of sympathy were gone from her voice, replaced by her clipped, no-nonsense voice. This was no Southern belle, but a transplanted Yankee. He wondered how she'd ended up so far south.

"It's confidential and, at this point, circumstantial. No one else is considering this angle but me." Her chin tilted up and her lips thinned. She was stubborn, no doubt about it. He could easily sneak back into her home when she was asleep tonight and check her computer and her files, but for some unknown reason, he wanted her to freely share any information she had with him.

"Not good enough." She kicked her foot absently as she studied him, making the dog's ears on her slipper wave back and forth. He grinned, unable to stop himself. Her eyes followed his and she swore as she uncrossed her legs and set her foot firmly on the floor. "They were a present from a friend, okay?"

"They're cute. They suit you." And he realized that they did. There was something soft and cuddly about the slippers that suited her.

"That's what she said too." She went back to business immediately. "What do you know about this case?"

"Nothing." He held up his hands in mock surrender when she scowled at him. "Okay, I know about as much as you do." He rattled off what he knew about the victim, ending with the fact that the young woman hadn't had any enemies and the boyfriend had checked out clean. It was believed that she was the victim of a random act of violence.

Sophia shook her head vehemently. "It didn't seem random. Something about her drew the killer to her. What was it? The way he had her laid out, naked from the waist

up with her arms spread straight out by her sides, seemed almost ritualistic. She didn't land that way on her own. He positioned her intentionally. Why the cemetery and why did he drain her blood?"

Zane's chest swelled with pride. "You think like a cop."

She shrugged. "I've been doing this for a few years—you watch and you learn." Scooting to the edge of her chair, she leaned forward until their noses were almost touching. "What do you know?"

Sighing, he leaned away when all he wanted to do was yank her into his arms and tumble them both to the floor. His hormones were definitely in overdrive when it came to wanting to claim this woman. He wanted to mark her as his so that every other man she met would know that she belonged to him.

He wanted to rage against the feeling even as he wanted to slide his cock into her naked body and pound into her until they were both sweaty and crying out their release.

"I can't tell you." He'd never trusted anyone with what he suspected. For that matter, he'd never trusted anyone with anything. Not since his father had died.

He shoved that dark memory out of his mind. That was a long time ago and had nothing to do with this.

She stood then, bringing her stomach right in line with his face. He'd only have to reach up the tiniest bit to be able to take her nipple into his mouth. He barely swallowed a groan as his cock began to throb again. Before he could reach out and yank her into his arms, she stepped away and headed back to the door. There was no doubt that he'd worn out his welcome and she was tossing him out on his ear.

He had a choice to make.

His head was advising caution. He could sneak back later when she was asleep or the next time she went out again. But some deeper instinct was telling him to trust her. Since his instincts had saved his life more times than he could count, he decided to trust them.

"You can't tell anyone."

She stilled and turned slowly around. She stared at him long and hard, as if trying to decide if she could trust him to keep his word. He deserved that, he supposed, but it still made him bristle.

A series of raps came on the door. Zane was on his feet in a second, striding toward her, drawing his weapon as he went. She blinked at him as he pushed her behind him. "You expecting anyone?"

"Pizza." She stepped out around him, eyeing the nine-millimeter semiautomatic he had clutched in his right hand. "And I'm really hungry, so don't shoot the delivery guy."

He grinned in spite of himself. Damn, but this woman had guts. "I'll just check." He didn't wait for her consent, but went to the door and peered out through the peephole.

A bored teenage boy stood there with a large box in his hand and a bag in the other. He holstered his weapon, unlocked the door and opened it.

"Delivery." The young man rattled off the amount and Sophia all but pushed him aside and handed several crisp bills to the delivery guy. He took the money and walked away, sending a "thanks" over his shoulder.

Sophia hustled back to the living room, pizza in hand, leaving him to close and lock the door. He guessed that meant that he was invited to stay for supper. The corners of his mouth twitched upward into a slow smile. Maybe he'd be invited to stay for dessert as well. Shutting the door and turning the locks, he followed her back into the living room.

The delicious aroma of tomato sauce and cheese wafted from the box she was carrying, but Sophia's appetite had disappeared. Zane York was a mystery. He wasn't directly involved in the investigation, at least not in an official capacity. But he did know something. Or at least he thought he did.

He sure was jumpy. He'd been by her side with his weapon drawn before she could blink. For a large man, he sure could move quickly. She'd found herself staring at his back before she could open her mouth to question him. It was a strange feeling to have someone try to protect her. Not that she needed it. She was more than capable of taking care of herself. She'd been on her own since she was sixteen. But still, it was nice that he'd wanted to.

The living room, which was normally cozy and inviting, seemed almost too small with him in it. Zane seemed to take up too much space and suck up almost all the air. Sophia shook her head and sighed. She must be hungrier than she imagined. It was the only reasonable explanation for such fanciful thoughts.

Dropping the box on the scarred wooden coffee table, she sat back in her chair. The small sofa would have been better, but she needed some space from Zane. The man was too potently male. He distracted her.

Digging into the bag, she drew out a bottle of soda and some napkins. Zane had followed her back into the room and lowered himself to the edge of her sofa. Well, it was a loveseat really. She didn't have room for a full-sized sofa. The blue fabric with its smattering of flowers was comfortable enough, but most importantly, it matched her chair and fit into the space.

"Help yourself." She opened the box and grabbed a slice of pizza, looping the warm, stringy cheese around the crust before bringing it to her mouth and taking a huge bite. She closed her eyes and chewed. Spices exploded against her tongue and she groaned as she swallowed. Her stomach growled, reminding her it had been quite some time since she'd bothered to feed it.

She opened her eyes to find Zane staring at her. No, not at her, at her throat. When she'd closed her eyes and swallowed, she'd tilted her head back. His gaze wandered upward to her mouth. Pure, unadulterated lust filled his gaze. She choked on what was

left of her pizza, coughing and sputtering as her eyes began to water. No man had ever given her such a carnal look in all her thirty years.

Leaning over, he handed her the bottle of soda as he rubbed her back. She pushed his hand away from her as she sipped some of the liquid and swallowed her pizza.

"You okay?"

She nodded, lowering her head for a moment, letting the deep, seductive tones of his voice flow over her.

Sitting back, she tossed the remainder of her piece of pizza back into the box, knowing she wasn't going to be able to eat with him sitting across from her watching every bite. "Tell me what you know. Or," she grabbed a napkin and wiped her fingers, "what you think you know."

Zane sat back and crossed his booted foot over his knee. It pulled the fabric of his jeans tight against his thighs, outlining the thick muscles there. She forced herself to look at his face and focus on what he was saying. Normally she had no trouble concentrating on work. In fact, she was usually obsessed by her work. There was something about this man that threw her off balance and she didn't like it. Not one bit. It gave him power over her.

"Do you remember Jethro Prince?"

Sophia took a sip of soda as she searched her memory. "Club owner. Suspected of dabbling in every crime from gambling to drugs to prostitution. Found dead about three years ago in an upstairs office at his club." She thought further, tapping her finger against the edge of the sweaty bottle. "He and his right-hand man were both killed. The police said it was gang-related."

"That's what they said."

It wasn't so much what Zane said, but how he said it that had her reporter's instincts humming. "That's what they said," she repeated. "You don't agree?"

He didn't answer her, but asked her another question. "Do you remember that a little while before that, there was talk that several of Prince's men went missing?"

Again she searched her memory. Leaning forward, she placed her bottle on the table. "They never found any bodies."

"That's right."

Her mind was spinning, but she couldn't make any connections. "How are those two incidents related to this murder?"

Zane shrugged. "I don't know. They might not be related at all, but my gut is telling me otherwise."

She knew all about gut instincts. It was what separated ordinary reporters from those who became the best. She'd always had a nose for sniffing out the truth and those instincts were telling her that Zane was on to something. Maybe something big.

"What do *you* think?"

He sat forward, planting both large feet on the floor and clasping his hands between his spread thighs. "The incident in the alleyway involved a woman named Delight Deveraux. She'd witnessed a murder and was caught when she ran from the killers. The men turned up missing and she escaped. She claimed she didn't know what happened to them."

Sophia nodded, remembering more of the details of the case. "Trauma. Fear. It's possible she blocked it all out." She couldn't imagine what that poor woman had gone through.

"Then came the death of Prince a short time later. Both he and his man, Smith, were found with their necks broken. No one saw anyone go up to the office. There was no screaming, no fighting. Nothing."

Sophia scuffed her slippers back and forth. "Unusual, but then again, maybe not. Most folks don't want to get involved, especially when it involves organized crime. It's a good way to end up buried in an unmarked grave at the bottom of a swamp."

Zane raised an eyebrow, acknowledging her point. "One of the detectives on the Deveraux case was Sam Cassidy. He's a good cop – or at least I thought he was."

"You think he's hiding something."

"Maybe. He's not a cop any longer." Zane reached out and took her hand in his, playing with her fingers. She tried to concentrate as he rubbed his thumb in slow circles over the top of her hand. "He was also the first on the scene at Prince's club. He discovered the bodies."

"Why was he there?"

"That's what I asked him. He said he'd gotten a tip."

"That's plausible." After all, she got tips all the time. That's how a lot of police work and reporting got done.

"Plausible, except both times someone else was involved. Someone with money and power."

Sophia ignored the dip in her stomach and the shortness of her breath as Zane turned her hand over and stroked the sensitive pads of her palm. "Who?"

"Lucian Dalakis."

She froze, her blood running cold as she remembered the two words she'd found on the note with the body last night. "What did you say?" She could feel all the blood draining from her face.

"Delight Deveraux is now Delight Dalakis. She married him soon after the incident."

"Maybe that's coincidence." As a reporter, she had to stay objective, but she knew that Zane was right. There was a connection and it wasn't a good one.

Zane tilted his head to one side, studying her. "Maybe. But Sam Cassidy, the detective in charge of both cases, recently quit the police force. You want to guess who he works for now?"

It was easy to connect the dots. "Lucian Dalakis." She'd have to find out everything there was to know about the man and his family. Maybe they were involved, or maybe, like her, they were being pulled into a deadly game against their will. If she hadn't taken the note last night, the police would already be questioning Mr. Dalakis.

"That's right." Zane's grip on her hand tightened. His face looked grim. "And not just Lucian, but the Dalakis family. There are three brothers, but only two of them, Lucian and Stefan, live in the United States. The eldest, Cristofor, lives with his wife in Transylvania."

"Transylvania!" She knew she sounded like a parrot, but she couldn't help it. That was just too unbelievable. Sophia shivered, but it had nothing to do with being cold. Her mind was conjuring up all kinds of connections. Janice Barton's blood had been drained from her body. She shook her head, unbelieving.

Zane sighed, his expression tight. "Did I mention that they're all vampires?"

"That's insane." She pulled her hand away from him. "Maybe they're involved in some way. Maybe some kind of cult or ritual killing." She knew her voice was getting louder and shriller, but she couldn't stop it. *Vampires!* She might not be from Louisiana originally, but she'd lived here since she was sixteen. She knew all about the local superstitions and beliefs, but she wasn't buying it.

Not for one second.

Chapter Four

Zane watched the color drain from Sophia's face, which was a feat in and of itself considering that she'd already been pale. She jumped to her feet, jarring the table and tipping the bottle of soda that sat there. Only his quick reflexes allowed him to catch the bottle and right it before the sticky liquid spilled everywhere.

Slowly Zane got to his feet and held his hand out to her. She ignored it and began to pace. "You're crazy, you know that?" There was only room for her to take about six paces. She turned when she got to the wall. "You're from New York, not New Orleans. Besides that, you're a cop. You know better than to believe in mythical monsters."

"It's not myth, but fact." He hesitated, trying to figure out a way to prove it to her without scaring her. "I've seen things in my lifetime." Some of them he'd do anything to forget. He shook off the dark memory and focused on Sophia.

"Like what?" She skidded to a stop and crossed her arms over her chest, tapping her slipper against the hardwood floor. The look in her eye told him he was on thin ice and about five seconds from being tossed out of her apartment and probably her life as well. His gut clenched at the mere thought. He wouldn't allow that to happen. Something was happening between them, some sort of connection he'd never felt before and he damn well wasn't going to lose it until he figured out exactly what it meant.

He sauntered over to her. One of her feet slid backward, but she stopped herself from backing away and held her ground. He was ridiculously pleased with her show of courage even though he knew it had nothing to do with him. When he stopped, he was so close to her that the toes of his boots were brushing against the black noses of her puppy-dog slippers. He could feel the heat of her body, smell the sweet scent of woman and vanilla mixed with the mouthwatering aroma of tomato sauce and cheese.

What man could resist?

Leaning down, he watched as her lashes fluttered, brushing against her cheekbones. When he pressed his lips against hers, she gave a slight whimper of need that set his heart pounding. Her hands flattened against the hard planes of his stomach as if she might shove him away.

He wasn't ready to be pushed away just yet. Flicking his tongue along the seam of her lips, he traced it back and forth until they parted on a gasp. Taking his time, he snaked his tongue inside for the briefest of tastes before retreating.

Her fingers curled into his shirt.

Over and over, he played the game of advance and retreat until Sophia had parted her lips wide for him and they were both gasping for air. Never had he tasted anything

quite so fine in his life. Her particular flavor was marked by the spicy food she'd eaten, but was tinged with a sweetness that was all woman and uniquely Sophia.

She moaned and plunged her tongue into his mouth. This time it was his turn to groan as he sucked her tongue deeper. It was just a kiss. That's what he kept telling himself as his body pulsed with a driving need. He was as affected as she was by the simple caress. Heat suffused his body, making his clothing feel way too constricting and tight.

Her nails dug into his chest. He wasn't sure if she was trying to hold him closer or push him away. The kiss might have moved to a whole other level if he hadn't felt the shift in his own body, the warning that things could get out of hand quickly if he didn't get control.

Gripping her forearms in his hands, he eased her away from him, breaking the kiss. Their lips clung for the briefest of seconds as if neither of them wanted the kiss to end. Zane swore inwardly even as he continued to push her away. It was for her own safety.

"Well," she began, running her fingers through her short hair. Her chest was rising and falling quickly as she sucked in much-needed air and attempted to calm herself. He could see the flutter of her pulse in her neck and it drew him. He wanted to run his tongue over the pulsing vein, feel the life coursing through her body. "That wasn't very professional." She narrowed her gaze. "For either of us."

Her cheeks were tinged red, partly from embarrassment and partly from the scrape of the stubble on his jaw. Seems she had very sensitive skin. He'd have to remember that. "Not professional." Unable to resist, he leaned down and nuzzled her neck, stroking his tongue across the irresistible pulse at the base. "Necessary," he whispered as he forced himself to back away.

She gave a small laugh. "Maybe from your perspective, but from mine, it's just a complication." Putting some distance between them, she started to scuff back to her chair.

That she could turn her back on him and just walk away from what had just occurred between them filled him with unreasonable anger. His body was vibrating with a hunger that only she could assuage. The only thing that would stop the relentless need streaking through his blood would be to take her, claim her as his. His teeth ached, he wanted her so badly.

He knew on one level that she was absolutely correct. They needed to keep this strictly professional. But as a man, he wanted her to acknowledge the connection between them. His baser animal instincts were screaming at him to claim her, to mark her as his so that any other man who even looked at her would know that she was taken, that she belonged to him. Somehow he knew that was true. It was there. He could feel it in the very marrow of his bones.

This woman was his.

He didn't think or he might never have done what he did. It changed everything and complicated an already tangled situation.

Grabbing her arm, he spun her around to face him. She appeared more annoyed than frightened, which was good. "You want to know how I know vampires are real?"

"Sure." She shrugged. He could tell she was humoring him. He'd been holding on to his temper and his patience by a thread and when she shrugged at him, that thin thread snapped.

As if sensing the change in him, she tried to move away. But it was already too late for her, too late for him. He moved steadily forward, forcing her to move backward until her back hit the wall. There was nowhere for her to go.

Sweat pooled beneath his shirt. His flesh felt as if it was on fire. He shook his head, trying to regain some sense of control, but it seemed to have vanished in an onslaught of need. His cock throbbed, and as he lowered his head toward her, he caught a whiff of arousal emanating from Sophia. She wasn't as unmoved as she wanted him to believe. She might be able to put on a brave face and pretend there was nothing between them, but her body didn't lie.

"So tell me," she all but taunted. He could hear the slight quaver in her voice, see the bravado in her face. Immediately, he felt remorse. He didn't want to frighten her. What the hell was wrong with him? He took a deep breath and struggled for control. He almost had himself back on an even keel when she blew it all to hell again by adding, "Then you can get the hell out of my apartment."

The beast within him surged to life. This was his mate and he could not deny it any longer. Could not let her deny it.

"How do I know?" He placed his hands flat on the wall on either side of her head and his thighs on either side of hers, effectively caging her with his arms and his legs. He could feel his eyes changing and knew that they were beginning to glow.

Sophia's heart was pounding against his chest. "Stop it." She pushed against him, but he wouldn't be moved.

He ignored her struggles and lowered his gaze until he captured hers. She froze as he began to smile, exposing his sharp fangs. "I am one."

Sophia wanted to scream, but couldn't make her throat work. There was no breath in her lungs. It was as if Zane's words had sucked all the air from the room. She didn't believe it. Wouldn't believe it. Yet it was there before her very eyes.

She might pass off the red glow in his eyes as a trick of the light, but those teeth... She shuddered. Those teeth could not be denied. They'd elongated, growing down past his lower lip.

Her legs trembled and she felt lightheaded. Sweat trickled down her temple. Goose bumps raced down her arms. She shivered as a chill racked her body.

She brought her knee upward and shoved at his shoulder at the same time. She didn't think about it. She just did it. Zane easily avoided her knee and pressed his body more firmly against hers. Bringing her right hand up, she swung at him. At the last

possible second, he shifted, keeping his head out of the path of her fist. Grabbing both her hands with his, he held them over her head.

The fight was over before it had really begun. Sophia knew she didn't have the skill or the strength to defeat a man like Zane. Closing her eyes, she shuddered. A picture of Janice Barton's body flashed in her brain. Was this what happened to the poor young girl? Had Zane overpowered her with his strength or had he seduced her and then drained her body?

Even as she thought it, her instincts were screaming in denial. In spite of her terror, in spite of her disbelief, she knew somewhere deep inside her that Zane wasn't a murderer. Yes, she felt he was more than capable of killing someone without an ounce of remorse. But he would only kill to protect himself or someone weaker. How she knew this, she didn't know, but the knowledge was there all the same.

Even now, she realized that he wasn't hurting her, and at no time had he hurt her. Yes, his large hands were wrapped around her wrists, but he held her loosely, his fingers stroking her skin. His massive body was pressed against hers. She could feel his arousal against her stomach, but he simply held himself there. This was a man who was keenly aware of his strength.

"Shh," he soothed. "I won't hurt you. I would never hurt you."

It was only when he spoke that she realized she'd let out a small whimper, part fear, part arousal. His words washed over her shivering body, warming her. She found herself believing him.

What was wrong with her?

She tugged gently and he released her right hand and then her left. He eased his body away and she found that she missed his heat. Okay, she could deal with this. She was a sensible woman and she'd get to the bottom of this.

"So." She licked her dry lips. Big mistake. His gaze went straight to her mouth and his eyes began to glow again. Thankfully his fangs had receded. "You're a vampire?"

Zane shivered and turned away, sucking in a deep breath before facing her again. "Yes."

Now what? She had a million questions, but why would she even ask them? Nobody would ever believe her. She still didn't really believe it herself. "So this is like *Interview with a Vampire*?" She shook her head, feeling as if she'd fallen into an Anne Rice novel.

"No. This is very real."

"Prove it." She needed more than just glowing eyes and fangs to convince her. Maybe he was one of those Goth guys who got off on pretending to be a vampire. Or maybe he was some kind of magician or illusionist.

Suddenly, he took a step away from her. She hadn't realized he'd actually been holding up her body. The lack of sleep, hunger and shock had all taken their toll on her and she felt herself sliding down the wall.

Zane swore, snatching her up into his arms as if she weighed nothing. The man was built. Shaking her head to clear it, she sensed him moving swiftly. "I'm all right. Just not enough sleep or food."

"It's my fault. I shocked you unnecessarily, and for that I am sorry." He lowered her and she felt the cushions of the loveseat beneath her. Zane looked totally disgusted and she knew that it was himself he was upset with.

"No big deal. It's not every day a girl gets to meet something straight out of legend and myth." For some reason that made the corners of his mouth twitch upward. "What's so funny?"

He shook his head as he pulled off her slippers and tossed them aside before reaching out and snagging the blanket from the back of the chair and carefully laying it over her. "I felt the same way when I first saw you."

Her forehead wrinkled as she tried to understand. "I don't get it."

He stood over her, watching her carefully. "You reminded me of a fairy is all. Your hair, your build." He shrugged.

The big bad cop looked embarrassed. If she wasn't mistaken, he was blushing. It made him seem more human somehow, less like a threat.

"I should go." Even as he said the words, he made no move to leave.

The heat that had been overshadowed momentarily by the fear surged back, suffusing her body with a need so great she almost groaned. "What are you doing to me?" She had to know if this was some kind of vampire thrall. Couldn't they do that? But, then again, maybe he was a hypnotist. Her logical mind struggled to find reasonable answers to explain what she'd seen.

"What do you mean?" His eyes narrowed as he studied her.

"This—" She broke off, not sure exactly how to put it without embarrassing herself. She shifted uncomfortably against the cushions, trying to ignore the surge of heat between her thighs. "This sexual need. It's not normal for me." His eyes widened at her candor and a slow smile lit his face. The man really was incredibly handsome.

"I thought it was something you did. Maybe some fairy magic." The humor left his face as he eased himself down onto the sofa beside her. "I feel it too. I've never felt this way about a woman before."

"Really?" She knew she sounded skeptical, but really, he was absolutely gorgeous and exuded a raw sex appeal that would instantly attract women. And she was...well...ordinary at best, strange at worst. Not many men over the years had been attracted to a slender, flat-chested redhead. "It's not some kind of trick or illusion?" Would he even tell her the truth?

He reached out and gently pushed a short lock of hair from her forehead. "Really. The power of it knocked me off guard and made me lose control. There's no excuse for the way I frightened you." His eyes looked so sad, she wanted to cry. "You're the last person in the world I want to fear me. I feel a connection to you." He picked up her

hand and placed it flat on his chest before laying his hand over her heart. "I don't know what it means, but I feel it in the marrow of my bones, in the every cell in my body." His face was somber as he delivered the line that would change her life. "You belong to me."

Sophia could feel the heavy beat of his heart beneath her hand. Did vampires even have heartbeats? Her mind was whirling. There was no denying that she was attracted to him and that attraction went beyond the physical. She knew what he meant when he said that he felt it in the marrow of his bones. She felt it too and it frightened her.

She knew better than to depend on anyone. She'd been on her own since she was sixteen, depending on only herself for everything. Being that connected to another person, especially when one of them wasn't human, was beyond scary.

"Do you drink blood?" She'd avoided the question long enough. She knew the legends the same as everyone else, but what she didn't know was what was truth and what was fiction. Maybe if she got him to talk about it, she'd be able to figure out just how deeply he believed this fantasy. It definitely didn't feel real.

Right now she still wasn't convinced that she hadn't hallucinated the whole thing due to lack of sleep and hunger. Perhaps she was asleep and dreaming all this. The only other explanation was that it was true and that wasn't something she was sure she could deal with.

Zane nodded, ignoring her as she involuntarily jerked away from him. "Yes, I need blood to survive, but I've never taken enough to kill anyone." He continued when she said nothing. "These days, I purchase blood through a dummy corporation. It's not the best option, but it does the job."

"What do you mean?" A part of her was appalled by what he was saying, but another part of her was fascinated by it. She'd always been inquisitive. It was that trait that had led her to her profession and it was that part of her that needed answers.

"There is nothing like the taste of fresh, warm blood."

Zane licked his lips and she couldn't help but shudder, imagining his mouth caressing her skin, his tongue licking every inch of her body. She knew she should be terrified, but instead she was drawn to the darkness she sensed swirling inside him. Her nipples puckered tight against her thin shirt. She was thankful the blanket was covering her so he couldn't see. Unfortunately, she could tell by the look on his face that he misinterpreted her shudder as one of disgust. He shifted farther away from her.

"Do people change when you take their blood?" Unconsciously, she rubbed her neck with her fingers.

"No." His words were clipped now as he continued. "The world would be littered with vampires if that were the case. Most vampires are born that way, but I have heard that some can be converted."

"How?"

His smile was cold. "The victim must be drained of blood and then must drink from the vampire. If she lives, then she is reborn a vampire."

"Okay." She tried to absorb what he was telling her, but it felt totally unreal, more like a tale used to scare kids around a campfire. "You said you heard. Don't you know?"

"I've never attempted it. There is a chance the person might not live through it and also the possibility that they might go insane after the conversion. Besides which, living as a vampire has its drawbacks."

"What are they?" The reporter in her wanted the facts. The woman in her wanted to know everything about the man seated beside her.

"Sunshine will kill me. I can stand a few minutes after dawn and before dusk on a cloudy day, but that is all. During the day a deathlike sleep comes over me, leaving me vulnerable to attack. Many vampires over the years have had their existence cut short by a stake through the heart or a quick beheading. Then there is the obvious fact that I need blood to survive." He paused briefly before continuing. "But other than that, I live quite well. The night is a place of beauty and endless fascination."

She asked the question that she'd been putting off. "Exactly how old are you?"

"A little more than two hundred years old. I was born in the year of our Lord 1800."

Two hundred years old. Her head was spinning at the mere thought of it. If what he was saying was true, he'd seen so much, done so much. And maybe she was losing her mind to even consider believing him. Then his phrasing struck her as odd. "In the year of our Lord? I thought vampires couldn't go into churches?"

He laughed. "Pure fiction. I took great solace from a particularly kind minister back in 1852. Holy water and garlic won't hurt me either. That is nothing more than a writer's imagination."

Sophia nodded, still trying to absorb everything.

"You know what I am." He slowly stood, towering over her supine body. "I have long suspected that the Dalakis are vampires as well. But we are not so different from humans. There are evil vampires and good ones. I'm just not sure where these men stand."

"If they're evil? If they're responsible for the death of Janice Barton, what will you do?"

"They can never be brought to justice in the traditional way."

He sounded almost bored by the conversation, but she wasn't fooled. Sophia pushed aside the blanket and sat up. "What will you do?"

He shrugged. "What I have to."

She surged to her feet. "What will you do?" She was almost yelling now, her heart thumping at the mere thought of him being hurt. There were three Dalakis brothers – not to mention their ex-cop – and only one of him.

Zane stared at her, and the eyes that watched her were merciless. "Kill them."

Chapter Five

"Are you crazy!" Sophia jumped to her feet, practically shoving him off the sofa. The blanket fell to the floor forgotten as they faced each other. She was magnificent in a rage. Her eyes snapped and her cheeks were a rosy red, which was much better than the pale white they'd been for the past few minutes.

He wasn't quite sure exactly what she was referring to. "Perhaps."

His nonchalant answer seemed to make her even angrier. She tilted her head up to meet his gaze. "There are three of them." She poked her finger into his chest, one time for each word she spoke.

He nodded, enthralled by the concern she exuded.

"Well then." She threw up her arms.

"Well what?" She was so close that he could see each individual eyelash, wanted to reach out and see if they were as soft as they looked. Her brows scrunched together as she frowned and he rubbed his finger between them to smooth away the wrinkles. She jerked her head away and frowned even harder. She wasn't going to give this up any time soon. He sighed and tried to follow her train of thought.

"We're agreed then." She stared at him earnestly. He had no idea what she thought they'd agreed to.

"Sophia?"

"No. It's the only way. Until you know what's going on with the Dalakis family and their former cop, you and I will work together, pool our resources and try to get to the bottom of this."

Zane shook his head adamantly. "No. I don't want you anywhere near the Dalakis family or Sam Cassidy. Not now. Not ever." The memory of the poor woman from the cemetery was burned into his brain. It was all too easy to imagine Sophia in her place, and that was enough to chill his blood. He could not allow that to happen. Would not allow it. She would listen to him.

"Sorry." She untangled her feet from the blanket and headed toward the hallway. "I'm already involved. You seem to forget that I'm the one who got the phone call last night sending me to the cemetery. I'm the one who found the note." She bit her lower lip and glanced away.

"What note?" he growled. "There was no mention of any note in the police report."

"Umm, why don't you forget I said that?"

"Sophia?" His voice was little more than a guttural groan. His vocal cords were tight as he clenched his jaw to keep from yelling at her. What was she up to now?

"Okay." She threw up her hands. "But remember, I know something about you that you don't want known either, so you can't say anything about the note."

He was across the room before she could blink, crowding her body back against the wall. "It's not wise to threaten a vampire." He kept his tone low and menacing. By God, the woman needed to be afraid of him if it meant she might actually listen to him.

"Probably not." Her voice broke and she cleared her throat. "But you've had plenty of time to hurt me if you wanted to."

Zane thought his head might explode at her faulty logic. He pressed a finger beneath her chin and tilted it upward before letting his hand graze the seductive curve of her neck. "Maybe I like to toy with my victims first. Get their trust."

She swallowed hard and shivered even as she shook her head at him. "No. I don't think so." Her words were little more than a whisper.

"You don't think so." He moved his fingers up and down her neck slowly, feeling the blood rush beneath her silky skin. "But you can't be sure, can you?" Leaning down, he stroked his tongue over the fluttering pulse at the base of her neck.

"Zane," she moaned as she pushed closer to him.

He groaned, all thoughts of frightening some sense into her forgotten beneath the onslaught of need that coursed through him. She tasted so sweet and she was here with him now, her hands clutching his shoulders and tugging him closer instead of pushing him away. Wanting to feel her hands against his skin, he cursed his shirt. A red haze filled his brain. The instinctual need to taste her, to pleasure her, to claim her overwhelmed him. Nothing else mattered at this moment.

He trailed small, nipping kisses up her neck to her ear. Gripping the succulent lobe between his teeth, he tugged. She was wearing two small silver hoops in her ear. He pulled gently on them one at a time, savoring her whimpers of pleasure.

His cock was swollen and aching, pressing against his zipper. He leaned his hips inward, thrusting his erection against her stomach. Her hands fell from his shoulders and gripped his hips, pulling him tighter against her. His lungs were working hard as he buried his face in the curve of her neck and sucked in air.

"Sophia." He grabbed her hands and tried to put some space between them. She threw a leg over his hip and yanked him back. "Sophia," he gasped again. He was almost to the point of no return, but he needed to be sure.

Cupping her face in his hands, he leaned down so that she could see the red tingeing his eyes, see the sharpness of his fangs as they protruded through his gums. He could feel the need for blood mixing with his lust for this particular woman. If he didn't stop soon, he wasn't sure he'd be able to. He'd always had control. But not, apparently, with Sophia.

"We have to stop now," he gasped.

"Why?" She shimmied her hips closer even as he tried to stop her.

"I've never felt this way before, Sophia. I want to taste you, to lick you." He finally did what he'd wanted to do ever since he first laid eyes on her. Leaning down, he captured her bottom lip between his teeth and sucked on it. It was plump and ripe, and he took his time, running his tongue over every part of it before releasing her. She was breathing hard, her eyes glazed with desire. "I want to taste every inch of your delectable body. Lick the slick folds of your pussy until you shriek with pleasure." He nipped at her top lip, eliciting a moan from her. "I want to hear your voice begging me to fuck you." He stroked his hands down her collarbone and between her breasts until they rested just below the small mounds. "Then I want to fuck you until we're both a sweaty, writhing mass, screaming our releases."

She licked her lips and he groaned. He could hear the whoosh of her blood as it hurried through her veins, could smell her arousal as it wafted up between them. It was enough to drive a sane man mad. And Zane was no longer certain of his own sanity.

"Do you know what I want to do then?"

She shook her head, her eyes wide and unfocused.

"I want to sink my teeth into your soft, supple flesh and taste your sweet blood." She whimpered as he stroked the undersides of her breasts with his thumbs. She wasn't wearing a bra beneath her thin tank top and he could feel the suppleness of them. "I won't take too much. Just a taste. Just enough so that we have a connection."

"What do you mean?" she gasped. "A connection."

"It means that I would be able to read your thoughts if I wished to. I would be able to find you, no matter where you went. It might take me some time, but there is nowhere you could go where I could not eventually find you."

"Why?"

He understood what she was asking him. In response, he ground his pelvis against her, letting her feel his heavy arousal again. "You belong to me."

"I belong to myself." She groaned as he flicked his thumbs over her distended nipples.

"There is something between us, Sophia. Something powerful. If I take you, you are mine." It took every ounce of strength he possessed to let her go and push away from her. Her strength was no match for his, yet she almost held him prisoner with the lightest touch of her hand. "Be sure." He reached out to touch her face, thought better of it and dropped his hand back to his side. "If we do this, there is no going back. For either of us."

Sophia reached a shaky hand up to her face. Her lips still tingled where he'd nipped and licked them, her breasts ached from where his thumbs had stroked them and her pussy throbbed with a powerful need unlike anything she'd ever experienced. His raw promises echoed in her mind and body. She swallowed hard. Fear and lust warred within her.

Zane would demand much from her. For a woman who'd never found it easy to be in any kind of relationship, this was scary. She was finally beginning to grasp the fact that Zane wasn't just a man, but a supernatural being. She could no longer deny the evidence of her own senses. No longer find a logical way to explain it all away.

What was she thinking to even consider starting a relationship with him? But it wasn't really a relationship, was it? It was sex, primal and hot. Her body was screaming yes, but her head was shouting out a warning. She could try to fool herself that it would only be sex between them, but she'd be lying to herself. There was already something between them, some connection that neither of them could deny.

Staring at him, she saw the unvarnished need in him and, for a split second, the vulnerability. He wasn't any more comfortable with this than she was but, like her, he could feel the ties that were somehow binding them together.

How had they even gotten to this stage so quickly? She'd just met him, for heaven's sake. She'd never considered jumping into bed this fast with a man. In fact, she'd only ever had two lovers and she'd known both of them for some time before she'd had sex with them. They'd gone from arguing about the note she'd found to this in mere seconds.

Zane's gaze softened. "It's all right if you're not ready yet."

Yet. That one word stood out between them because she knew he was right. It was only a matter of time until it happened. There was too much sheer chemistry and attraction between them for it not to. If they worked together, it was inevitable. The alternative was to never see him again and her very soul cried out in anguish at that thought.

What to do?

Her body was throbbing for his touch. She wanted him to do everything he'd promised. She wanted his hands on her, his tongue and lips tasting her. She wanted his cock inside her, driving them both over the edge. But did she want the rest of it? Did she want him to take her blood? She unconsciously rubbed her neck with her hand and could feel her pulse pounding there.

"Sophia." His tone was softer now and she couldn't resist its unspoken plea.

She looked up at him and saw the understanding in his face. That more than anything else helped her decide. "I'm not sure about the whole blood thing, but I want the rest of it."

Zane's big body shifted closer to her. She could feel the heat surround her. "I may not be able to stop myself. When the bloodlust is upon me, I may not be able to resist the lure and temptation of your blood."

Would it be so bad? It was only a small amount of blood. She probably lost more when she donated to the local blood bank. Then there was the connection that it would create between them. "You'll be able to read my mind?"

"Yes." He placed his hands on the wall on either side of her head and leaned his forehead against hers. "But I promise not to trespass unless I feel you are in danger."

"Okay." There was nothing else to be said. She wanted him as much as he seemed to want her. Whether she was making the right decision or not was debatable, but she was making the only one she could.

She could feel him tense against her and then he released a huge breath. Leaning away from her, he yanked the tails of his black T-shirt out of his jeans and whipped it over his head in one easy motion. He tossed it aside and reached for her.

If she'd thought he looked impressive with his shirt on, he looked even more amazing with it off. It was as if a layer of civilized veneer had been stripped away, releasing the primal male beneath it. His skin wasn't as pale as she'd expected, but more swarthy. A crisp mat of hair spread from nipple to nipple before descending in a thin line toward his navel. Thick muscles covered his torso, a not-so-subtle reminder of his strength. She wanted to touch every inch of him and explore.

While she'd been admiring him, Zane had been busy. Her top was halfway up her stomach. "Lift your arms," he murmured and she did. He whisked her top away, leaving them both naked from the waist up.

She started to cover her breasts with her hands but then made herself stop. He knew what he was getting. He gave a grunt of approval as he cupped her waist and slowly began to slide his hands upward. His palms were large and warm as they covered her breasts easily. She could feel her nipples pucker even tighter as he began to caress the small mounds.

"You are so responsive to my touch." There was wonder in his voice and suddenly Sophia no longer cared that she wasn't that well endowed. He shifted his hands lower so that he was cupping her, his thumbs stroking her nipples.

"Only with you." That was true. She'd never really gotten much pleasure out of a man touching her breasts before. Partially because she'd always sensed her past boyfriends' disappointment. There was none of that with Zane. He was staring at her as if she were absolutely perfect. And for the first time in her life, she truly felt that way.

Leaning down, he captured her mouth with his, his kiss slow and languid as he thrust his tongue inside and toyed with hers. As if he had all the time in the world, he angled his face to deepen the kiss, taking his time and tasting every inch of her mouth. Sweat broke out on her forehead. The man knew how to kiss. Sophia could feel her inner muscles contracting and releasing, sending thick cream from her slit to coat the outer lips of her pussy.

When he finally released her lips, she was gasping. She needed air, but she needed him more. "Zane," she pleaded.

"Tell me what you want? Anything. Everything." His voice wrapped around her like silken cords, keeping her captive to the desire growing between them.

She licked her lips. "I want you to touch me."

His lips moved down her throat and she arched her neck back, wanting him to touch her everywhere. His sharp teeth nipped. Not enough to break the skin, but

enough, she knew, to leave a mark. It was a primitive way to mark her as his, but it was also incredibly arousing.

"Here?" He licked the curve of her throat where it met her shoulder.

She shook her head. "Lower."

"Hmm." He nuzzled her throat before stroking his tongue over her collarbone.

"Lower." Grabbing his head in her hands, she pushed his head down until it was poised in front of one of her breasts. His thumbs had been stroking around and around her nipples in a lazy rhythm that were driving her crazy. "Suck it."

"My pleasure," he murmured as he opened his mouth and placed it over the swollen tip. Moist heat surrounded her, sending bolts of pleasure from her breast to between her thighs. Her pussy ached and she arched her hips against his, wanting, needing the pressure of his erection against her moist, swollen folds.

His tongue flicked over the tip of her nipple, teasing it. She gripped his head tighter, her short fingernails digging into his scalp as she tried to pull him even closer. "More."

Zane took the distended peak between his teeth and gently bit. Sophia cried out and tilted her head back against the wall. She wanted him now.

Frantically, her hands went to the front of his jeans, plucking at the button until it opened. She pulled the tab of the zipper down and shoved aside his underwear. His cock sprang forward and into her hand. She marveled at the length and width of it as she stroked him from base to tip. He groaned, releasing her nipple in the process. He captured her hand, pulling it away from him and brought it to his mouth, placing a hot kiss in the center of her palm.

"I'm too close. I'll come if you keep touching me."

"I want to touch you," she protested.

"Next time," he promised, and her stomach clenched. Next time. There would be a next time for sure. "I want you, Sophia," he gritted out from beneath clenched teeth. "I can't wait any longer." She realized then that his movements might have been lazy and slow, but he was a man on the edge. It came to her then that he'd been giving her time, making sure she was ready for him. It made her want him even more.

"Then don't wait."

His movements were jerky as he snapped the tie on her pants and shoved them down her hips. They fell to the floor, trapped around her feet. Her plain white cotton underwear followed. Then he spun her around until she was facing the wall. If he hadn't been holding on to her she would have stumbled in the tangle of clothing around her ankles. She struggled to get out of her clothing and managed to shake her pants and underwear off her ankle.

"Lean forward and support yourself against the wall. Spread your legs and give yourself to me. I want to see the sweet globes of your ass and the hot, wet folds of your pussy. I'll bet that your thighs are wet too, you're so ready to be fucked."

Never had a man said such things to her. Instead of being disgusted, she was aroused by his excitement and obvious need. She could hear it in his voice, feel it in the way he thrust his cock against her bottom, rubbing it along the crease.

She spread her legs and leaned forward, planting her hands wide. It left her in a very vulnerable position, not able to see him. She had no idea what Zane would do next. His hands covered hers as his body seemed to surround her. He slowly trailed his hands over her arms, leaving a line of goose bumps behind.

"I know I said that I would taste you first, eat you until you screamed, but I can't wait."

"Next time," she gasped.

He stilled and chuckled. "Yes, next time I'll do everything that I want."

Sophia shivered at the raw promise in his voice. Whatever he wanted to do to her, she wanted to experience it. Her head fell forward as he stroked his hands over her shoulders, down her sides and around to her breasts. His cock slipped between her thighs and he flexed his hips so that it was sliding back and forth over her aching flesh. Every time he pushed forward, he brushed over her swollen clit, making her groan. It wasn't enough.

"Zane." She tried to angle her hips so that he'd slip inside her, but he always moved at the last second.

"Tell me what you want."

She knew then what he wanted and she gave him the words she'd never given to another man. "Fuck me, Zane. Make me yours."

He growled low in his throat as his hands wrapped around her breasts. He pulled her back toward him, shoving her legs wider with his foot. He pushed the head of his cock just inside her. She could feel the muscles expanding and contracting, accepting him.

"From this moment onward, you are mine." He thrust inward in one strong stroke. Sophia gasped, partly from pleasure, partly from pain. She hadn't had a lover in years. She was tight and he was large and thick. Her fingers curled against the wall and flattened again. There was nothing for her to hold on to. "Just relax," he crooned.

She felt invaded, filled to the brim, and she knew that he wasn't even all the way in yet. Taking a deep breath, she released it slowly, moaning when his hands began to caress her breasts, teasing the sensitive nipples.

"That's it," he praised as he pushed himself deeper. Her inner muscles expanded and contracted, pulling him inward. "You can take me, sweetheart. I know you can."

The pain had receded now and only pleasure remained. She pushed her hips back toward him, encouraging him. With each stroke he went a little bit deeper until he was seated to the hilt with each plunge of his cock.

Sophia couldn't take it any longer. Her skin was tight, her breasts ached, her pussy felt as if it were on fire. She needed to come, couldn't take any more of this sensual

torture. "Zane," she groaned as he shoved himself so deep she could feel his balls hitting her damp flesh.

One of his hands slid downward between her spread thighs. He began to stroke her clit with his finger. His other hand teased and tormented her swollen nipples. His strokes became harder and quicker as he fucked her. She planted her palms onto the wall's flat surface to keep her head from hitting it. She cried and squirmed and tried to push back against him as he plunged forward.

Fire zipped through her veins, making every nerve in her body tingle and burn. This was beyond anything she'd ever experienced. Sweat covered her skin as the smell of sex surrounded them. Their gasps and grunts were the music to which they moved. Her inner muscles contracted impossibly tight and Zane grunted.

Sophia screamed as she came. A gush of pleasure washed over her as she shivered and shook, her muscles contracting and relaxing in an unending rhythm. Zane yelled and then she felt the hot rush of semen release inside her. It felt incredibly good. Too good. She realized then that neither one of them had thought of a condom.

The thought disappeared as she felt him leaning over her back. His breath was hot on her neck, his teeth sharp as they scraped over her skin. She wanted it. Tilting her neck to one side, she offered him what he needed, giving herself fully to him.

The pain was piercing and she gasped. Then it was gone as pleasure flooded her again. She could feel the sharp pull as he began to suck and knew he was drinking her blood. Incredibly, her orgasm, which had begun to subside, heated up again. Another rush of release flooded her body as she came again and again and again.

The world dimmed as he continued to drink and she slumped toward the wall. She heard him swear and then the world went blank.

Chapter Six

Blythe Nixon shivered, pulling the lapels of her jacket closer together as she crossed the dark, rainy street. Her sneakers made no sound on the pavement. No one looking at the mop of wet hair, her bare face devoid of all makeup and her faded jeans would ever mistake her for Bliss, the sultry singer who entertained at The Club for almost a year.

She shivered again. A whole year as prisoner of one Jethro Prince. He hadn't had to physically lock her up, but he alone had held the key to her imprisonment. But those days were over.

Stopping just outside the door, she stared. This place had been one of the most popular spots in the city before the hurricane, but to her it was hell. She'd have never come back except someone from the club had called, informing her that the new owner had been going through the books and was paying former staff wages that had been lost when Jethro Prince and his goon, Smith, had been found murdered, in hopes of luring some of the staff back to work there. There was nothing on the face of this planet that could entice Blythe to return here to work, but she wasn't so well off that she didn't need the money.

Swiping her hand over her wet face, she thrust her memories away, closing them behind a steel door in her mind. Not now. The grief was still too fresh and she couldn't afford to show any weakness. When she was safe at home, locked inside her single-room apartment, then she could let down her guard.

Feeling the dampness seeping through her jeans, she forced her hand to clasp the handle of the door and pull it open. She ignored the fact that her fingers were trembling. Just the cold, she assured herself. It had nothing to do with returning to the place that held such horrific memories. She thought that coming here in the morning would lessen the impact of the place, and maybe it would have if the sun had been shining, but the gloom added to the oppressive feeling that threatened to choke her.

Taking a deep breath, she made her feet take one step forward and then another. The door slammed shut behind her with a finality that made her jump. She clenched her jaw and ignored the chills running down her spine. She could leave here any time she chose. She was no longer a captive to a madman's whims.

"We're closed," the man behind the bar called out. "We don't open until this evening."

She squinted through the dim light. "Barney, is that you?"

The bartender laid the glass he'd been cleaning down on the glossy countertop and leaned forward. "Bliss?"

Blythe shuddered at the name as she strolled toward the bar, trying to give the appearance of being relaxed. Her heart was pounding so hard she was surprised that Barney couldn't hear its frantic beat.

The name had been *his* idea. Nobody had called her by that name since she'd fled here the night that Prince had been killed. "It's Blythe. That was a stage name and one I never particularly liked."

The big, dark-haired man shrugged good-naturedly. "Sure thing, Blythe. You cut your hair."

She ran her fingers through the short cap of light hair. She'd worn it long her entire life and had loved it. Prince had loved it too and had ordered her never to cut it. The minute she'd been free of him, she'd chopped it all off.

"You coming back to work?" Barney's voice brought her back to the task at hand.

Stuffing her hands in her pockets, she shook her head. "No, I've got another job. I'm just here because I got a call saying they had the money I was owed when things fell apart here."

Barney nodded soberly. "Yeah, that was a mess. Prince's death and the police investigation shut this place down for months. It didn't even have time to get back up and running before Katrina hit." He shrugged again. "But it all worked out okay."

Blythe remembered the sheer giddiness of relief that had come with the news of Prince's death. "Yeah, it all worked out okay."

"You'll never guess who's running the place now."

Frankly, she didn't care. All she wanted to do was get her money and get out. But Barney had always been kind to her and she didn't want to be rude to him. "Who?"

"Prince's younger brother, Adrian."

Her stomach lurched and Blythe laid a hand across it to try to calm herself. Bile burned in her throat as she swallowed. "Really?" Jethro had mentioned his brother, but had assured her many times that no one knew about *them*. He was afraid that his brother might want a piece of her if he knew their little secret and Jethro Prince wasn't a man who shared.

"Yup. Came rolling into town about three months back and started renovating the place."

Blythe couldn't keep up the pretense of being calm. If she stayed here much longer, she was going to toss her cookies all over the pristine floors, and wouldn't that leave a lasting impression on the new management? The last thing she wanted to do was bring attention to herself. "Where do I pick up my money?"

Barney's eyes narrowed and he opened his mouth as if he might say something, but at the last second, he changed his mind and shrugged. "The accountant is back in the office."

"Thanks." Turning, she headed toward the back. Each step farther into the bowels of the place was hard, but she forced herself to do it. She could feel Barney's eyes on her until she disappeared around the corner and headed down the short hallway.

Sucking in a deep breath, she tried to steady herself as she knocked on the door of the office. "Come in." The voice was male, and thankfully, not one she recognized. Grasping the doorknob, she twisted and pushed inward. The man seated behind the desk was older than she was, his hair threaded with gray. A pair of wire-rimmed spectacles perched on his nose and his gaze flicked toward her for a second before returning to the journal in front of him. He finished entering some numbers and then laid his pen aside.

"I'm here for my check. My name is Blythe Nixon. I got a call." It had taken her three breaths to say those few words. Sweat coated her body beneath the clammy clothing and her stomach continued to roil.

The man in the chair, however, either didn't notice or didn't care. He grabbed a file folder from the corner of his desk and began to riffle through it. "Nixon. Nixon," he chanted as he flipped through papers. "Ah, yes." He plucked a sheet out of the bunch and laid it on the desk. His eyes widened briefly as he read whatever was on the sheet. "You were a singer here?"

"Yes." She didn't want to make conversation. She was beginning to wish she'd never come here. To hell with the money.

"You were paid extremely well." His eyes flicked over her threadbare attire as if he couldn't understand why anyone had given her so much money. Her voice had only been part of it. Prince had paid her well, but not excessively so. He'd always preferred to hold the purse strings himself, but he wanted her to get used to the kind of life he could give her. A complicated man was Jethro Prince.

"I just want my check." She held out her hand and waited. If he didn't give it to her in the next five seconds, she was out of here.

Taken aback by her abruptness, he nonetheless recovered quickly. "Of course, Ms. Nixon." He turned the paper around to face her. "Just sign here. It says that you've been paid what you were due and that you won't bother the new owner looking for any more."

Picking up the paper, Blythe read the document from start to finish. It wasn't long and said exactly what the accountant said it did. "I'll want a copy of this." She grabbed a pen off the desk and scrawled her signature across the document before handing it back.

His bushy brows rose behind his glasses, but he nodded as he shifted his chair over to his copier, lifted the top and popped the page inside. Seconds later she had her copy as well as her check.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome, Ms. Nixon." He lowered his head and went back to work on the journal that was open on his desk. She'd been dismissed, but she didn't care. Whirling around, she hurried from the room, closing the door behind her.

Relief hit her so hard that she felt lightheaded and leaned against the wall for support. The papers in her hand crinkled as her fingers closed around them. Forcing herself to relax her grip, she straightened the copy of the release form and the check, folded them carefully and placed them safely in the inside pocket of her jacket. She would stop at the bank on the way home and deposit her money.

Feeling calmer now, she shoved away from the wall and had taken two steps down the hall when she heard voices coming toward her. Great! The last thing she wanted to do was run into anyone else she knew. She just didn't have it in her to participate in any more small talk. These people were from her past, a past she was doing her best to forget.

Moving silently, she slipped through a door just to her left. It was a storage closet, but she didn't care. She'd only be in here long enough for them to get past her and then she was out of here. There was no time to close the door, but Blythe got it pushed almost all the way shut just in the nick of time. Their voices were almost on top of her now.

"Sign that new band, Toxic Shock—we want to attract a young crowd for the opening weekend. Make a big splash." The deep male voice reeked of authority.

"Yes, Mr. Prince." The other man hesitated. "About that other problem."

Blythe stilled, afraid to even breathe. The last person she wanted to meet face-to-face was Adrian Prince. She shuddered to think how close she'd come to running right into him. The men seemed to pause right outside the door. Like a statue, Blythe refused to so much as blink.

"What have you found out?"

"The Dalakis family is extremely rich and powerful."

"They may be rich, but they have no idea just what power is," Adrian snarled impatiently. The more he spoke, the more she heard the similarity to his older brother.

"Yes, sir."

"Continue," he snapped.

"No one remembers seeing Lucian Dalakis in the place the night your brother and Smith were murdered."

"I don't give a shit about Smith. The man didn't do his job. If he were still alive, I'd kill him myself."

"Yes, sir."

"Saunders." Adrian said the other man's name softly, but the menace was there. Blythe shivered, barely daring to breathe.

"There were several people waiting to get into the club who remember seeing him that night. He's a big man, good-looking too from what the women were saying."

"You can ask him for a date later, Saunders, if you want to fuck him."

Blythe felt an unexpected sympathy for Saunders. She could sense his fear even through the thickness of the door. It was a palpable thing. Fear was one emotion she knew intimately. Shame was another.

"Yes, sir." Saunders continued, his voice shaking. "No one saw him leave, but the police never questioned him." He hesitated briefly. "Your brother had kidnapped Chase Deveraux to lure his sister here. She's now married to Lucian Dalakis. I don't think you can discount that."

The sound of flesh hitting flesh was loud in the quiet hallway. A man moaned. "Do you think I'm stupid, Saunders? Do you think I don't understand the implications?"

"No, sir. No, sir." The ingratiating whine in the other man's voice made her stomach twist. "I just wanted to know what you want me to do about it."

"Send out Farley and one of his boys. Tell them to watch for their opportunity. I want to make an example of Lucian Dalakis and his little wife. If that bitch had died when she was supposed to, my brother would still be alive."

Blythe blanked her mind and forced herself to take light, shallow breaths. Her vision dimmed, but she blinked hard. If she fainted, they'd find her. If they found her, she was as good as dead.

"Yes, sir. I'll get on that immediately."

"See that you do." The voices were moving away from her now. "I need to talk to my accountant."

A door opened and closed. Then footsteps hurried back down the hall. Blythe leaned her hands against the wall, lowered her head and sucked in a deep breath. That was close. Too close. She counted to thirty before she eased the door open. Slinking down the hallway, she took a deep breath and entered the bar area. Barney was still behind the counter.

Forcing herself to smile, she sauntered toward him. "I got my check. I also went back to the dressing rooms and looked around. Sort of one last look, you know." She gave him a practiced smile, one that always seemed to make fools out of men. God knows that if her time with Jethro Prince had taught her anything it was how to be the consummate actress. Her life had depended on it, just as it did now. This place was permeated with evil and she wanted out.

Barney stared at her and then smiled slowly. "I know what you mean. You want a drink?"

She could see the eagerness in his eyes. Knew that he thought he might score. She gave him what she thought of as her disappointed pout. It made a man think that she really wanted to stay, but had to go. "Maybe next time." She glanced at her watch. "I'm already late."

"Sure thing, Blythe. Next time."

Waving her fingers, she forced herself to stroll across the room and out through the front door. If anyone asked about her, Barney was her alibi. Clutching her coat tight around her shivering body, she all but ran back to her meager apartment. She made herself detour at the bank and deposit her check. If anyone checked up on her it would seem strange if she didn't.

By the time she pushed open the door of her apartment, she was shaking like a leaf. Closing it behind her, she engaged the seven locks she'd had installed. Excessive maybe, but even though Prince had been dead three years, she still didn't feel safe. She didn't think she ever would.

Yanking off her wet clothing, she let it drop from her numb fingers as she went into the bathroom and turned the shower on full. Climbing into the tub, she let the hot water rain down on her as she shivered and shook. She didn't think she'd ever be warm again. She was cold all the way to her soul.

Lifting her face to the spray, she let it wash away the salty tears that flowed over her cheeks. Her life had just gotten even more complicated.

Now she had to figure out what to do about Lucian Dalakis and his family.

The sun was just setting when Sam Cassidy left the main house and headed back toward his apartment. The steel shutters had just risen so he knew that the family would be up and around any minute. He tried to give them their privacy.

Stopping in the middle of the garden, he lowered himself to a stone bench. The rain had stopped early in the afternoon and the sun had dried up most of it. Everything smelled fresh and clean. This place had changed a lot in the last years, mostly due to Delight. She loved to garden and had turned the small area behind the house into a peaceful oasis.

Linking his fingers together, he leaned his elbows on his knees and contemplated the situation. Zane York was back in town, nosing around. No crime in that, but Cassidy knew he had to go and talk to him sooner or later, find out what he really wanted with the Dalakis family.

But it was more than that. He was restless.

Sighing, he released his fingers and rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. He'd been feeling twitchy for a few days now. Like he was waiting for something to happen. Something big. Something nasty.

Sitting quietly, he allowed the peace and serenity to seep into his bones. Whatever was going to happen would happen and there was nothing he could do about it. All he could do was react to the situation as it occurred and handle it.

He snorted softly under his breath. That's what he did best—handle things.

Finally, the lush scent of the trees and flowers relaxed him. He was contemplating what to cook for supper when a slight rustling sound reached his ears. Very slowly, he

drew his weapon and waited. Maybe it was just a bird or a stray cat, but Cassidy didn't think so. The insects had gone quiet.

There it was again, this time closer. The bulk of the trees surrounding the bench hid him from view, so he waited. He caught a glimpse of a sneakers and jeans as the hooded figure scurried past him.

Silently, he rose and raised his weapon. "Freeze. You're on private property."

The figure, probably a young boy from the size of him, froze for a brief moment and then bolted, dropping an envelope from his hand. Swearing, Cassidy holstered his weapon, already in pursuit. His long legs ate up the distance. Reaching out, he snagged the back of the sweater and pulled.

The boy stumbled backward, falling to the ground. Keeping hold of the sweater, Cassidy flipped the boy over and stared down into the bluest set of eyes he'd ever seen in his life—like a sunny Texas afternoon. Those eyes were fringed with long, black lashes that brushed against high cheekbones when their owner blinked. Lush, rosy lips were parted on a gasp.

"You're not a boy."

"Very astute of you." The voice was sultry but tinged with anger. "Let me up. I wasn't doing anything wrong."

Cassidy helped her to her feet but didn't release her. She came to just about shoulder height on him and might be slender, but there was no doubt that she was all woman. Even damp and dirty, she smelled good. Like summer rain, sweet and clean. His cock stirred, pressing against his zipper.

She struggled, brushing against his chest. He froze as he felt her soft breasts graze him. She swore and tried to pull away. "Let me go."

"No." Cassidy had no intentions of letting his mystery lady go. Not until he knew why she was here and what her name was. And if he didn't stop being stupid, he was going to get himself killed. She could easily have pulled his weapon from his holster and shot him with it.

"No," she repeated. "You can't keep me here."

"You were trespassing."

"So sue me." She dug in her heels and refused to move when he tried to pull her toward the house. Her hood fell back to reveal a cap of soft blonde hair. It was so light it was almost white.

"Don't want your money." In a quick move, he pulled both her hands behind her back and held them in one of his. "I want to know why you were here." He patted her down, looking for weapons and some kind of identification. She swore at him again when he reached inside her back pocket and pulled out a bank deposit receipt. "What do we have here?"

She dropped without warning, letting all her weight fall. Cassidy released her automatically, not wanting to hurt her. She rolled to her feet and took off like a flash. He

started to pursue her, but let her go. Now that he had a bank slip, he was certain he could find her.

Strolling back down the path, he picked up the envelope. It was addressed to Lucian. Ignoring that fact, Sam ripped the envelope open and plucked out the single sheet of paper inside. He read it. Then he read it again. By the third time he was swearing a blue streak and wishing he'd ran after the little vixen. He'd find her, and fast. He had to know more about this latest threat to the family.

Who'd have thought that Jethro Prince would have a brother who'd come looking for revenge? Crumpling the letter in his hand, he strode to the house. The brothers needed to know about this immediately.

Chapter Seven

Zane sat beside the bed and watched Sophia sleeping. He swore at himself again, cursing his lack of control. In his lust for her, he'd taken too much blood. When she'd slumped against the wall, his heart had all but stopped. He'd pulled out of her, scooped her into his arms and hurried into the bedroom, placing her carefully on the bed.

She'd passed out, but her breathing was good. As a precaution, he'd willed one of his fingernails to elongate and had sliced open his wrist, allowing his blood to flow freely. Bringing it to her sweet lips, he'd used his grip on her mind to make her drink. Even passed out, she'd fought him, but he'd ruthlessly overpowered her mind and forced her to drink. When he was satisfied she'd had enough, he'd tugged his wrist away and licked his tongue over the cut, healing it instantly.

Her pants and underwear were still caught around one of her feet. Pulling off the rest of her clothes, he'd tucked her under the covers. She looked so small and fragile lying there, but he knew that to be a lie. She had the courage of a lion and the heart of a warrior. He'd smiled in spite of himself as he collected her puppy-dog slippers from the living room and placed them by the side of the bed.

He hadn't wanted to leave her, but he'd had no choice. He had things to do and the night was quickly waning. Knowing she'd go right to work as soon as she woke, he once again forced his will on her, commanding her to sleep until he returned the following evening.

In spite of his command, he'd been surprised when he'd arrived just after sundown to still find her asleep. He figured it was her exhaustion, lack of food and the emotional and physical turmoil she'd been through last night that had allowed his compulsion to stick. Sophia wasn't as weak-minded as most humans were.

Glancing around, he examined her bedroom as he waited for her to wake. He hadn't really had time last night. Like the woman lying in the bed, the room was practical, yet it had touches of whimsy. The furniture was plain—a simple bed, four-drawer dresser, a straight-back chair and a nightstand, all made of a rich honey maple. The area rug was shades of green, matching the utilitarian blinds that hung on the two windows. The walls were a very pale yellow.

A large chunk of rose quartz sat on top of the nightstand next to a lamp with a rose-colored shade. An iron candleholder perched on top of her chest of drawers and had a large, squat beeswax candle seated on top of it. Several pictures hung on the wall, both depicting nighttime scenes of New Orleans. Zane recognized both artists. He had some of their paintings hanging in his own apartment back in New York.

The room smelled like her—a hint of vanilla, honey and a scent that was uniquely Sophia. He took a deep breath, drinking it into his lungs. Satisfaction filled him. Now

that he'd tasted her blood and she'd taken some of his, they were connected for all time. Nothing could ever change that.

She stirred and pushed the pristine white sheets away from her face. The colorful green and purple comforter was already bunched around her waist. Her eyes fluttered open and once again he was struck by the purity of her pale green eyes. She frowned when she saw him sitting in the chair beside the bed. "What are you doing in my bedroom?"

"Do you remember what happened?"

She blinked several times. He could see her memory flooding back as sleep disappeared and was replaced by a growing alertness. She sat up in bed so quickly the sheet fell to her waist, exposing her breasts. The rosy tips were puckered and he longed to reach over and kiss them both. Realizing she was naked, Sophia grabbed the sheet and yanked it up over her. Zane sighed, wishing this would be simple, knowing it would be anything but.

"You. Me." She broke off and rubbed a hand over her face, careful not to let her grip on the sheet falter. "We." She shook her head. "I don't usually have wild, unbridled sex with a man I've just met. What time is it?"

"It's just after seven."

"That's impossible." She glanced over at the clock radio that sat on her nightstand.

"It's the next night, Sophia. You slept the whole day away."

"Damn it." She surged out of bed, dragging the sheet with her. "I had things to do today. An article to write." She swayed on her feet and he reached out to steady her.

"You were in no shape for anything after last night."

She whirled around to face him. "I remember last night. You said you were a vampire." Her face paled, making her few freckles stand out prominently across her nose and cheeks as she sat down heavily on the mattress. He wanted to kiss each of those freckles. "I saw your teeth and your eyes, but part of me didn't believe it."

"Believe it," he muttered darkly.

"You." She broke off and swallowed hard. "You drank my blood, didn't you?" She reached behind her neck and rubbed it as if it were sore.

"Yes."

"I don't remember what happened after that."

Zane eased down onto the bed beside her. "The bloodlust took over. My need for you was so strong the first time, I took too much."

Her eyes narrowed. "What do you mean you took too much?"

"You were already weak due to lack of food and sleep. Coupled with what had just happened between us, well..." He searched his mind for the right way to explain what he'd done. What he'd felt he had to do.

"So I passed out." She shrugged, tugging the sheet tighter around her.

Her nearness was affecting him. He already had a throbbing erection and bloodlust simmered just below the surface. He wanted to strip away the sheet, spread her across her milky white sheets and fuck her senseless. When she was exhausted with pleasure, he wanted to drink from her again. Her blood was rich and thick and sweet. He'd felt energized all last night and still felt the buzz in his body today.

"It was more than just passing out. You were weak."

"What did you do?" When he hesitated, her agitation grew. "Zane, what did you do?" Her voice was raised to almost a shout.

"What I had to. I gave you some of my blood."

Sophia stared at Zane with growing horror. There was no apology in his stark words. His stern face was set, his lips pursed in a thin line. His hands were resting lightly on his thighs but his fingers curled into fists and his big body tensed. She tried to imagine herself drinking blood and began to gag. A slightly metallic taste filled her mouth.

"Oh God," she moaned as she surged off the bed and hurried into the bathroom with him right behind her. She slammed the door in his face and locked the door. Not that the puny lock would keep him out if he wanted to get in.

"Sophia." She wanted to put her hands over her ears to block him out, but she could hear him perfectly through the wood door. "You haven't changed. You're still the same as you were. Think of it as a blood transfusion."

She had the door unlocked and yanked open before she could think better of it. "It's not the same as a blood transfusion. I drank your blood." She couldn't believe she was actually saying those words out loud. "Furthermore, I didn't even know I was doing it. You did something to me, didn't you?"

Zane nodded. "I won't lie to you, Sophia. You were weak and needed it. It was my duty to take care of you." He crossed his arms over his chest and stared down at her, his entire body uncompromising and reeking of male arrogance and testosterone. "I took control of your mind momentarily and compelled you to drink. It wasn't easy, though. Even weak, you still had a strong mind."

"That's good to know," she snapped. "But obviously it wasn't strong enough to stop you."

"No human could stop me."

She shivered at the finality of his tone. What had she gotten herself into?

A more horrifying thought occurred to her. "Oh God," she gasped. "I'm not a vampire now, am I?" She felt all the blood rush from her head and swayed. The implications were just too much for her to take in. She didn't want to be a vampire. She liked her life just the way it was, thank you very much. It was one thing to have a vampire as a lover and another thing totally to even contemplate becoming one.

Zane cupped the back of her neck with his palm. The heat from his hand sent a shiver down her spine. "No, you're not a vampire. It doesn't work that way."

"How does it work?" She locked her knees to keep from crumpling to the floor in a heap.

"The small amount of blood that I gave you last night is not enough to convert you. In order for that to happen, you'd have to be drained almost totally of blood and then have it replaced by mine." He stared down at her, his eyes almost black with emotion. "You'd have to die first, Sophia."

Right. She had a vague memory of him mentioning something about this last night, but she was so muddled right now, she couldn't think straight. She so didn't want to hear this. How did anyone agree to do that? The possibility of something going wrong was enormous and there was obviously no going back or changing your mind once the deed was done.

Zane's face softened as he gave her neck a light squeeze before releasing her. "Everything is going to be all right, Sophia. Why don't you get a shower while I cook you something to eat?"

"You're going to cook for me?" She shook her head, not quite sure she'd heard him correctly.

"What about some eggs and toast with some bacon?"

Her stomach growled, shifting her mind back to the mundane and reminding her that she hadn't been feeding it very much lately. "I don't have the stuff to make that."

"I brought it with me." Zane reached out his hand and brushed his thumb over her cheek. Just like that her stomach clenched and her body softened. The man's charm was lethal.

She took a step away and his hand dropped back to his side. "Okay. You make breakfast while I shower."

The corner of one side of his mouth kicked up in a lopsided smile, which made him appear younger. Which was impossible, of course. The man was a two-hundred-year-old vampire.

Thinking about all this was giving her a headache.

He started to speak, but she held up her hand. She couldn't talk any more, not until she had a cup of coffee and some breakfast or supper or whatever it was. Sighing heavily, she started to close the door again and then stopped. "What you did last night. The whole making me drink your blood thing. Don't do it again." She felt slightly violated that he'd taken over her mind to make her do that.

"I won't," he promised and then ruined that promise when he continued. "Unless I think your life is in jeopardy."

Slamming the door in his face again, she turned the lock. "Your meal will be ready in about twenty minutes," he called out. She leaned her forehead against the door and listened to his footsteps as he walked away. She felt like banging her head against the

wooden panel but resisted the urge. The last thing she needed to do was addle her brains further.

As she pushed herself away from the door, a piece of vampire folklore ran through her brain. A vampire had to be invited into a person's home or they couldn't enter. She didn't know if that was true or not, but she'd certainly held the door wide open for Zane York. Her body ached and tingled in unexpected places. She hadn't been with a man in so long that last night's wild sex had certainly put her muscles through a workout.

Picking up her toothbrush, she wet it and then spread a generous amount of toothpaste over it. Her mind started to run through her calendar as she began to brush. She was supposed to have written articles for several different papers today. That was money she couldn't afford to lose. Then there was the major piece for a weekly magazine. Thank heavens she'd almost finished that. Another hour at most and that would be completed. It wasn't due until tomorrow, so she still had time.

Leaning over the sink, she spit and began to rinse. Cupping water in her palm, she slurped noisily, wanting to remove every last trace of the metallic taste from her mouth. Then she had to check with her police sources and the detective in charge of the case and see if they'd found out anything else. There was a follow-up with Janice Barton's family as well as the research she needed to do on the Dalakis family. She definitely shouldn't have slept the day away, but apparently that hadn't been her choice.

Satisfied that her teeth were clean and the taste was gone, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. It was time to take stock of the rest of her body. Dropping the sheet, she stared at herself in the small bathroom mirror. She appeared normal, if a bit pale and tousled, but that was to be expected after everything she'd been through.

Grabbing her makeup bag, which she kept mostly for the rare business meeting that called for being dressed up or special occasions, she whipped out her compact and opened it. Angling the mirror, she turned and used both mirrors to try to see the back of her neck. She could barely make out the faintest pinpricks of two marks, but there was certainly no mistaking the hickey at the base of her neck. She remembered him doing that, remembered the way his teeth had closed over her skin in an erotic bite.

She shivered.

Snapping the compact closed, she tossed it back into the makeup bag. Crossing over to the shower, she flicked on the taps and tested the water before stepping beneath the flow. The hot water pummeled her aching body, washing away the sweat and sex of the night before.

What was done was done. She was doing her best to try to not remember the earlier part of the evening. The sex between them had been phenomenal. Sophia had never experienced anything remotely like it in her life. Not that she was overly experienced, but even she knew that last night with Zane had been special.

Grabbing her bottle of shampoo, she poured a dollop into her hand and began to scrub her scalp. As she continued to lather her hair, she could practically feel his

presence in her apartment. It was like a low-level electrical current running through her veins. A level of awareness that she'd never shared with another person.

For a person used to being alone and quite content that way, it was more than a little disconcerting to say the least. She felt uncomfortable, as if he was already a part of her and she was a part of him.

She let the water cascade over her head until all the shampoo was rinsed away. Picking up her scented soap, she began to wash her body, doing her best to ignore the way her nipples puckered and her pussy throbbed as her thoughts continued to wander to Zane and what had happened between them.

It was weird, but on a deeper level, she found it almost...comforting, for lack of a better word. One of her deepest desires, which she hid even from herself most of the time, was to find someone who she could depend on not to disappoint or abandon her. She slammed the door on those thoughts. She was an independent woman and quite happy that way, thank you very much. One night of sex, no matter how incredible, didn't constitute a relationship.

For all she knew, Zane had slept with her to get information, to find out what she knew. She ignored the pang in her chest. He was a vampire. Surely he could have snuck into her home when she was out and gone through her notes and things if he wanted to. And she was truly losing her mind if she thought it was better for Zane to break into her home than it was to sleep with her for information. Maybe he hadn't done either of those things. Maybe he'd slept with her because he wanted to. As for information—all the man had to do was ask. She might not tell him everything, but still... Maybe he would ask. They hadn't had time to really talk since she'd awakened to find him hovering over her and a whole day of her life gone.

Stepping under the spray one final time, she washed the soap away, watching the lather flow down the drain. She wished all her problems could be solved as easily. Sighing, she turned off the taps and stepped out of the shower, grabbing a towel and wrapping it around her body.

She made quick work of drying her hair, dragging her brush through the short strands. Tossing the brush aside, she unwound her towel and dried herself. After she hung the towel over the shower rod to dry, she grabbed her moisturizer. Squeezing a thick dollop onto her palm, she took her time, spreading the rich cream over her arms, legs and torso. Usually it was a task she did quickly and without thought. Today, it felt more sensual. Sophia had an awareness of her body that she'd never had before.

Cursing softly, she grabbed the sheet and held it in front of her as she unlocked the door. The coolness flowed in, dispelling some of the steamy, humid air of the bathroom. She peeked out, but thankfully there was no sign of Zane.

Hurrying into her room, she tossed the sheet aside and pulled open her dresser drawers, gathering underwear, socks and a bra. She didn't always wear one, but she thought it better to be as covered as possible around Zane. Her bras and underwear were all white cotton, so they matched. Pausing at her closet, she donned a pair of jeans

and long-sleeved pale green pullover that was a favorite of hers because the color matched her eyes. It made her feel more confident and Sophia figured that she'd need all the confidence she could get in order to deal with the man currently cooking in her kitchen.

Satisfied that she was as ready as she'd ever be, she stuffed her feet into a pair of white canvas sneakers and headed for the kitchen. It was time to face Zane.

Chapter Eight

Zane knew she was standing behind him, watching as he continued to butter a slice of toast. Everything was ready. With his preternatural senses, he'd been able to follow her every move since he'd left her in the bathroom. It had been nothing short of sheer torture to listen to the shower running while he pictured the hot water cascading down her naked body.

When she'd left the bathroom, her scent had reached his nostrils. It was a clean, fresh smell of soap and vanilla, tinged with the lightest hint of feminine musk. It made his teeth ache.

He groaned and shifted restlessly. He'd had a hard-on since Sophia had opened her eyes and looked at him. Just one glance from those pale green eyes had him hot and ready. But her mood was anything but amorous at the moment, even if her body was slightly aroused. Sighing, he picked up the plate and took it over to the small, round table. "You might as well come eat while it's hot."

She hesitated for a brief second but then joined him at the table. He'd already poured coffee for her. There was nothing left for him to do but sit and watch her eat. Not wanting to crowd her, he returned to the counter to wipe up some crumbs. When he turned back to the table, she was seated there, mug in her hand, sipping some of the potent dark brew.

"Did you go through my notes?"

He didn't know whether to be insulted or amused. "No, I didn't."

"Why not?"

Sophia was obviously feeling testy this evening and he couldn't really blame her. Sauntering over to the table, he pulled out a chair, turned it around and straddled it. He folded his arms over the back and leaned forward. "Because I wanted you to show them to me."

"Why did you have sex with me last night?"

Zane was taken aback by the swift change of topic. "What do you mean?" As any sensible male would, he sensed there was a trap here, waiting to snap around him if he weren't careful. After two hundred years of living, he still didn't understand women.

She laid her mug carefully back down on the table, her motions rigid and controlled. "Was it for kicks? Maybe you needed a snack and pizza didn't appeal to you? You could have snuck in here when I was asleep or gone if all you wanted was to read my files."

Anger surged through his veins and he gritted his teeth to keep from yelling. "No, you sure as hell weren't a snack and it certainly wasn't for kicks." Zane gripped the

back of the chair tight between his fingers. It was either that or wrap them around her pretty little neck and shake her until her teeth rattled. And wouldn't *that* help his cause. Letting out a deep breath, he sought control. "Look, I could have read your notes any time, but I wanted more than that. I want your impressions, your ideas. You're smart, Sophia, and I respect your opinion. There's more in your head than there is in your notes."

She nodded slowly, picked up her fork and toyed with her eggs. "I see. So you threw me a pity fuck figuring it would make me more likely to share my thoughts with you."

The back of the chair snapped off in his hands, sending a loud crack echoing through the small kitchen. Zane tossed the wooden slat aside as he surged to his feet. The chair got kicked aside, landing on the floor with a thud as he stalked around the table and plucked her right out of her chair.

Her startled gaze flew to his face as he pulled her up until they were nose to nose.

"I slept with you because I wanted you. Because you're a fire in my blood burning out of control. Because I want you more than I want my next breath. I fucked you because I had to, because I needed to feel your skin beneath mine." He was breathing heavily now, his heart thumping hard. "And I drank from you because you let me and I would have done just about anything for a taste of you. Just one precious drop."

Her mouth fell open and he swooped downward, plunging his tongue inside. He groaned as her fingers curled into his shoulders, pulling him toward her instead of pushing him away. Her lips were soft beneath his as she parted them to let him in even further. Her tongue stroked over his and he tasted the mint of her toothpaste combined with the rich flavor of her coffee.

His hands left her shoulders and smoothed down her back, urging her closer. His erection was pressed against her stomach. She was so warm, so inviting. For a man who'd been cold and alone for his entire life, she was too much of a temptation to resist. He wanted to lose himself completely in her heat, in her softness.

Cupping her ass in his hands, he tugged her tighter to his body, loving the way she fit him so perfectly. He slid his fingers lower, stroking her cleft through her jeans. She was hot and wet. He could sense her arousal even through the layers of her clothing. And he could smell her. God, nothing was as sweet as the scent of Sophia's need.

Zane could hear the frantic fluttering of her heart and the seductive whoosh of the blood rushing through her veins. He could also hear the rumble of her stomach and feel her body's weakness. What was he doing? He'd promised himself that he'd take care of her, not jump her bones the minute she was awake.

Tearing his mouth from hers, he buried his face in the curve of her neck, taking a moment to steady himself. Unable to help himself, he stroked his tongue over the love bite he'd given her last night. Possessiveness surged through him even as gentleness prevailed.

He leaned away from her, holding her steady, his hands now on her waist instead of her lush behind. "My wanting you is separate from the rest of this mess. Don't ever forget it."

She nodded, looking tousled and totally bemused. Damn, this woman was dangerous to him. His need for her, her ability to make him lose total control was a weakness and one his enemies could exploit if they ever discovered it. He'd have to make damn sure no one ever found out about their connection.

"We'll talk about the murder after you've eaten." He seated her back in her chair and went around to the other side of the table and picked the broken chair off the floor. "Sorry about that." He sat down, taking care not to lean against the shattered back. "I'll make sure I replace it for you."

Sophia shook her head as she picked up her fork. "Don't worry about it. I got both chairs for a few bucks at a yard sale." Digging into the eggs, she brought the fork to her lips and tasted them.

As he watched the tines disappear into her mouth, Zane shivered. Her lips closed around the food and she shut her eyes and sighed. An erotic vision of Sophia taking his cock into her mouth and sucking it filled his brain. His skin felt as if it were stretched too thin over his body. It felt tight and confining. His balls ached and his erection throbbed unmercifully. He shook his head to dispel the image, but he knew he'd never be able to forget it.

He cleared his throat, grateful that the table covered the extent of his continued arousal. "Sorry it's cold."

"No, it's good. Great, actually. No one's cooked for me..." She paused, seemingly lost in thought. Then she shrugged. "In years." Picking up a piece of bacon, she bit off a piece and chewed. When she swallowed, she pointed the remaining piece at him. "Tell me what you know about the Dalakis family."

What he really wanted to do was just sit here and watch her eat and, when she'd had her fill, drag her back to bed. Focusing his attention, he sifted through the mounds of small details he'd discovered. "Okay. The family originally is from Transylvania. They can trace their roots back thousands of years."

"Really?" Sophia paused. "I don't even know who my father is."

Zane sensed the underlying hurt and anger but knew that now was not the time to question her about it. "Yes, they really can. At one point the family was large, but now it has been reduced to the three remaining brothers."

She munched her toast and swallowed. "Cristofor, Lucian and Stefan."

He inclined his head. "You have a good memory."

"Comes with the job." She sipped her coffee thoughtfully. "So, they're rich?"

"Loaded. They own property around the world, stocks in successful companies, artwork, jewelry, investments. You name it, they've got it. All legit from what I can tell. But, then again, I'm no accountant."

“Amazing.”

He was pleased to see that she'd cleaned everything from her plate. Getting up, he took her mug over to the counter and refilled it from the pot of coffee he'd made earlier. She smiled her thanks when he returned it to her. That slight curving of her lips, such a simple gesture, made him feel warm inside. Ignoring the sensation, he continued. “Any family that's been around for that long is going to have had money that's come down through the generations at some point. When that family is made up of vampires you can be certain that they won't lose money, but just continue to make it grow. They've got plenty of time to wait for investments to come to fruition. In fact, Cristofor's wife, Johanna, is in charge of the Dalakis fortune at the moment.”

“That's modern of them.”

Zane wanted to reach out and touch Sophia's hand. Instead, he laced his fingers together and laid them on the table as he leaned forward. “She's only been a vampire a short time. All the women are newly transformed.”

Her eyes widened and he remembered her earlier horror when he'd told her about the conversion process. He'd hated seeing the pallor of her face and smelling the fear that had permeated her skin. “Really? And all of them survived? I thought you said it was dangerous.”

“They got lucky,” he growled. “I've seen the other side of it too. The madness that slowly takes over a person, driving them totally insane. I've heard the maniacal laughter, the bloodcurdling screams and the pleas for death. I've watched as the male has slowly been dragged down into madness with his mate until both of them are lost to sanity.”

Sophia's smaller hand covered his and squeezed. “I'm so sorry, Zane. Was it someone you knew?”

There was no way he'd ever tell her the truth. No way he'd ever want her to know the legacy of his family. No way he'd ever tell her it was his parents.

Zane sat back, shaking his head as he pulled his hand from hers. He ignored the hurt look in her eyes. He didn't deserve her comfort, had forgotten for a brief moment what a tainted heritage he'd sprung from. He didn't dare love a woman, didn't dare to even hope to find a mate. He'd seen firsthand all too well what could go wrong.

He could sleep with Sophia and give her pleasure unlike any she'd ever experienced. He could find comfort in her body and in her company, but he couldn't love her. That way led to disaster for both of them. For a brief moment last night, he'd forgotten that. A glimmer of hope and possibility had flickered in his mind that maybe he could have what each of the Dalakis brothers had found. But sanity had reared its ugly head. Dreams were just that and not meant for one such as him.

He shoved away from the table. Sophia was watching him warily, the relaxed atmosphere between them lost. “If you're finished eating, we should go into your office and get started. The night is passing quickly.”

She jumped up from the table, grabbed her dishes and carried them to the sink. "No problem. I can show you my notes and you can fill me in on the rest of the details of the Dalakis family. I want to know everything about them."

So did he. He didn't have all the information he needed, but he would soon. He enjoyed the sway of Sophia's bottom as she strode into her office. This time he was determined to uncover the truth, even if he had to confront the brothers directly.

Sophia could feel Zane's eyes on her. It made her want to squirm. Her panties were still damp from the breath-stealing kiss he'd given her in the kitchen. She no longer had any doubts that the man truly wanted her. No one could fake that kind of hard-on.

She sensed that he was conflicted about the attraction between them. Well, he could get in line on that one. She was more than a little conflicted herself. Zane blew hot and cold, one second almost devouring her, the next practically pushing her away. She so did not need this kind of complication in her life right now. The man was a vampire, for heaven's sake. That was a huge enough obstacle without adding the normal lack of communication between the sexes.

Determined to take control, she flicked on the light switch, went straight to her chair and sat behind her large wooden desk, a relic from a thrift store. It gave her at least the illusion of being more in control of herself and the situation. She motioned to him to take a seat across from her. He ignored her and perched on the edge of her desk instead, staring at her bulletin board and the information she'd managed to pull together so far.

When he'd finished studying it, he turned to her and launched into a monologue on the Dalakis family. He told her everything he knew about the men and their history and about how they'd met their wives. Sophia didn't know if the women were brave or crazy to change their lives like they had and take the chance of becoming a vampire. She shivered when she remembered the stark pain on Zane's face as he'd talked about the possible alternative. Whoever had been driven insane by the intense conversion, they'd obviously been close to Zane. It still hurt him even if he'd never admit it.

He told her about Lucian and Delight and their problem with Jethro Prince and about the trouble that Stefan and Laurel Rose had encountered in North Carolina. Sophia was enthralled. It was like something out of a book and well beyond the scope of her reality. Zane finished by filling in the gaps about Sam Cassidy.

"Cassidy is the wildcard in all this. He'd never met the Dalakis family until the trouble with Prince and Delight. The man's a loner, was raised in foster homes in Texas and has no immediate known family. He moved to Louisiana when he was eighteen and studied to become a cop. He's lived here his whole adult life. He's thirty-five and has never been married, never even come close. Why he's attached himself to the Dalakis family I don't know. Maybe the money? Maybe not? Like I said, he's a wildcard."

"Could they turn him into a vampire? Maybe he wants immortality." It wasn't something she'd want, but Sophia knew that a lot of people would kill for the opportunity.

Zane shook his head. "Doesn't work that way. The only person a vampire can convert is his mate. Try it on anyone else and they'll just die or go mad. Other than that, you're born a vampire or you're not."

The hair on the back of Sophia's neck stood on end. "Vampires have children?" Wow! That was so outside all the mythology she'd read and the ideas she'd gleaned from movies.

The corner of Zane's mouth kicked up in amusement. "Yes, vampires have children. Not many, especially not in the past few hundred years, but yes. How do you think I came into being? Or the Dalakis brothers, for that matter?"

She shrugged. "Like in the movies, I figured they were bitten by a vampire and turned." She hesitated and then took the plunge. "Where are your parents?"

"Dead." His voice was flat, encouraging no further questions. Still she had to ask.

"I thought vampires were immortal?"

He pushed away from the desk and began to pace. "I told you last night that sunlight, a stake through the heart and being beheaded would kill us. Lack of blood will eventually do the same thing, but that would take quite a long, long time. We don't die easy." He laughed, but it wasn't a pleasant sound. "Love is a bitch too. Yeah, love can be a real killer."

Sophia longed to ask what he meant by that, but she didn't dare. Anger and pain were filling the room around them. She could sense how deeply this topic was hurting Zane. Standing, she held out her hand to him. "Okay. So where do we go from here?"

Zane shook his head as if coming back from an unpleasant place. "You mentioned a note."

Nodding, she tugged her desk drawer open and drew out the piece of parchment. It wasn't very large, but the implications behind it were huge. He took it from her and read the two words that were penned there. Swearing, he dropped it on the desk and glared at it. "Any ideas?"

Sophia shook her head. "I didn't even know who or what Dalakis meant when I picked it up. It was just instinct that I pocketed it." She picked up her pen and tapped it against the top of her desk as she leaned over it to study the paper. "It doesn't make sense for the Dalakis family to put it there to implicate themselves. They have too many secrets to hide."

Zane watched her, nodding thoughtfully. "So who do you think put it there?"

She thought for a moment, marshalling her thoughts. "Maybe the person who called me saw the killing and wanted to leave a clue for the police."

"Possible."

"Or," she continued. "Maybe the real killer wants to frame the Dalakis family. Maybe the killer is the one who wants revenge."

Zane was staring intently at her now. She stared into his muddy-brown eyes and saw the faint edges of contact lenses. Why would he wear contacts? Did vampires have problems with their eyesight? Before she could ask, he spoke, distracting her train of thought.

"Now that's a very interesting idea." He placed his hands flat on the desk next to hers. "I'll admit, I never considered any of this in that light before. It makes sense that men as rich and powerful as they are would have enemies. Maybe I should look into that side of things, starting with the incident with Jethro Prince."

"That's a good angle. It's local. I could see if anyone's taken over his club, his business."

Zane scowled, his dark brows lowering ominously. "That's too dangerous."

"I've got all kinds of contacts, Zane," she reminded him. "All I have to do is place a few calls."

"Okay," he reluctantly agreed.

"I don't need your approval." The man had to understand she was an independent woman who also had a job to do. "I'm just doing you the courtesy of letting you know what I'm doing." She sensed his frustration and anger with her reply, so she hurried on before he had a chance to say something they both might regret. "Why don't you check into what happened in North Carolina?"

He seemed surprised by her suggestion. "That's not local."

"So?" She pushed away from the desk and stood facing him. "The problem could have followed them home. As a cop, you've got a better chance of finding out what went on than I do. I don't have any contacts there."

He nodded. "Okay. Ex-cop, but that won't matter." At her raised brow, he sighed and answered her unasked question. "I took a leave of absence to come back here. I'm not sure if I'm going back to work. Promise me you won't do anything without talking to me first."

Annoyance filled her. She'd been on her own for forever and didn't like the idea of anyone, least of all a man, telling her what to do. "I'll do what I have to do."

"I could stop you, you know." Silken menace filled his voice as he leaned closer to her.

"You mean with that vampire mind meld stuff." She tossed her head when he nodded. "You can try, but I'm no longer weak or hungry. And if I ever found out you tried it, I'd never trust you again."

Zane's anger grew. She could see it in the tenseness of his massive body and the hard set of his shoulders. His lips thinned into a tight line, but she held firm. "Promise me you won't do anything to put yourself in danger," he all but growled.

She realized then that he wasn't trying to control her so much as he was trying to protect her. It was sweet, if misguided. He was probably in more danger every time he'd gone to work as a cop, but she knew he'd disagree with her. Typical male. "Okay. I promise not to do anything that I think will put me in danger."

He narrowed his eyes, but since he'd gotten what he thought he wanted, he relaxed. She wasn't about to tell him that her idea of what constituted dangerous would probably differ greatly from his.

"Now that that's decided, we should probably both get to work." Sophia was so far behind that she had a good three or four hours to put in at her home office before she could even begin to research. After all, a girl still had to earn the rent and food money.

"First things first." Zane's husky tones shot straight to her core, melting it. He was staring at her with that look in his eyes again. Lust made his face appear even harsher, his lips parted, giving her a glimpse of sharp, white fangs.

"We've both got work to do," she protested halfheartedly. Her taut nipples were poking through the cotton of her bra and her top. Her sex contracted and relaxed, reminding her that she was empty, telling her that she needed him to fill her.

He reached for her, lifting her and perching her on the top of her desk. "I promised you last night that I was going to eat you until you screamed with pleasure." His grin was positively wicked as he reached for the opening of her jeans. "And I'm a man of my word."

Chapter Nine

Cassidy studied the worn building as he took the stairs two at a time. It was an older home on the edge of the French Quarter. Like many homes, it had once been quite grand, but it had seen better times. It had been converted into apartments about thirty years ago and, although it had sustained some damage during Katrina, it had remained relatively unscathed by Mother Nature. His quarry lived in one of the small studio apartments on the top floor.

Using the bank receipt he'd plucked from her pocket and Stefan's computer hacking skills, Cassidy had found his mystery woman from the night before. Blythe Nixon was a local singer of some reputation who'd actually worked for the deceased Jethro Prince for almost a year, and until very recently, she'd been the sole supporter of her very sick mother. Her mother had passed away about a month ago, leaving Blythe with no known relative. He could certainly relate to that.

Last night had been tense when he'd shown Lucian and Stefan the letter the woman had dropped in the garden. Like a bloodhound, Lucian had wanted to see if he could pick up the woman's scent and track her. Cassidy wasn't sure if Lucian could actually do that, but he had discouraged it. The woman might be legitimate or she might be part of an elaborate scheme to try to trap Lucian and his family. He'd wanted to check out Blythe Nixon himself. And it had nothing to do with the fact that he'd been instantly attracted to her.

Or so he kept telling himself.

It was better for everyone if no one in the family had any communication at all with Blythe until he was sure she was clean and not involved in any way. He'd done some research on his own last night, contacting some buddies on the force and picking their brains about Adrian Prince. What he'd discovered hadn't been encouraging. If anything, Adrian was even more ruthless and depraved than his older brother had been. Added to the fact that he was calm and organized and not crazy like the elder Prince, he made for a formidable enemy.

Cassidy had stayed home with the women last night as, according to the letter, Prince had already sent some of his men out to kill them. The brothers had gone hunting. The man Cassidy had been even a few years ago wouldn't have condoned vigilante justice. But he'd seen too many criminals like Prince and his boys get off due to technicalities or lack of witnesses. Anyone who went up against organized crime bosses tended to disappear.

He knew there was no way to stop Lucian and Stefan in their quest for justice and he didn't even try. He understood their need to protect their families at all cost. He only wished he could have gone out hunting with them.

When they'd returned home just before dawn, they'd been grim but satisfied. They'd also surprised him. Instead of killing the men sent to harm them, they'd messed with their minds. Both of the men had calmly gotten back into their car and were currently on their way to California. Stefan had smirked as he'd related how Lucian had planted the suggestion that they had found religion and would spend the rest of their lives atoning for the wrongs they had done. The fact that the men's minds were weak after years of alcohol and substance abuse had made it possible. Plus, it would ensure that there would be no missing persons or bodies for the police to concern themselves with. Cassidy thought it a brilliant solution.

Adrian Prince might have fired the first shot in this war, but the Dalakis family had sent it right back at him. Prince would find himself short two men this morning. The Dalakis family was bracing for the next round of attacks.

Which was why he was here now. It was just after seven in the evening and Cassidy had been guarding the house all day. But now that the sun had gone down, the family was awake and alert and ready for anything.

Both houses had underground tunnels and escape routes they could use if necessary. And Lucian had already called Chase in New York. After his abduction last time, the family wasn't taking any chances. Chase was currently on the private family jet headed to Europe to spend some time with Cristofor and Johanna.

Cassidy had insisted that they have the jet return immediately in case the rest of the family needed to be evacuated. The men had bristled but had seen the sense in it when he'd pointed out that the women might have to be sent away for safety's sake. He hadn't been stupid enough to say it in front of either of the women though. He knew they wouldn't leave without their husbands, was in fact counting on that if he felt the family would be better off leaving town.

Reaching the top landing, he glanced at the first door and then turned left to the door at the end of the short hallway. According to his information, this was the place. Raising his fist, he knocked on the door and waited. He knew she was home—he'd seen a light shining from her window before he'd come up, plus he'd already found out where she'd worked and called them as well. She wasn't working tonight. In fact, she'd called in sick at the last minute.

He waited a few seconds and then pounded his fist against the door again. "Who is it?" The voice was low, but he recognized it immediately.

"I need to talk to you, Ms. Nixon." Cassidy stood to one side of the door. He didn't think she'd be armed or that she'd actually shoot, but it was better to be safe than stupid. "My name is Sam Cassidy."

"I'm not well, Mr. Cassidy. You'll have to come back another time."

He could almost picture her on the other side of the door. Her tousled cap of white-blond hair and blue eyes had haunted his dreams when he'd managed to catch a few hours' sleep. The dreams had been hot and erotic and he'd awakened with a raging hard-on that had abated to a low-level arousal every time he thought of her.

He grunted and adjusted his jeans. Now was not the time to let his dick do his thinking. He might be attracted to this woman, but he didn't know anything about her. "You were fine last night when you delivered your message. And call me Cassidy."

Tension permeated the air. Cassidy could almost hear her thinking, contemplating her options. Locks turned and the door opened, although two chains were still drawn across the door. Frightened blue eyes stared out at him. "How did you find me and what do you want?"

"It's not important how I found you. I just want to talk to you. To find out what you know." He kept his voice low and unthreatening even as he kept out of the direct path of the small opening in the door.

"I told you everything." Cassidy could hear the desperation in her voice and it made his stomach clench. She was afraid, very afraid.

"Just let me in so we can talk. That's all I want to do," he promised. "Just talk."

She chewed on her bottom lip and he almost groaned. Her lips were soft and pouty and he longed to soothe away the sting with his tongue. She obviously came to some conclusion as she closed the door. Cassidy waited, unsure if she'd open the door or turn all the locks again.

The scrape of two chains being pulled across metal was music to his ears. Then the knob turned and the door slowly opened. He didn't push his way inside but waited for her to shift back and let him in. He stepped in, careful to keep her in his sight. He hadn't seen any signs of a weapon, but he wasn't convinced she didn't have one.

She seemed smaller than she had last night, almost fragile, even though he put her height at about five-five. There was certainly no excess weight on her even though her breasts were more than a handful. She raked her fingers through her hair as she motioned to a chair. "Sit down."

It only took Cassidy three steps to reach the chair. The room wasn't very big and it was open, revealing almost the entire apartment. A small refrigerator and countertop range were nestled next to about three feet of counter space. A few meager cupboards were situated above and below the counter with a tiny sink at the far end. A round café table and two iron chairs sat in front of one of the windows, and the chair he was sitting in, a futon and a trunk, which doubled as a coffee table, took up the rest of the room. An armoire was pushed up against a wall, but he had no idea what was housed within—maybe clothing, maybe a television. He could see the door to the bathroom, which was just to the left of the front door. Minimal, sparse and neat were the best descriptions of the place. There were no signs of wealth of any kind. Considering the kind of money Blythe must have made the past few years, Sam was suspicious.

Blythe stood beside the trunk, her arms crossed over her chest. "Well?"

"You worked for Jethro Prince?"

His eyes narrowed as she shuddered. A mask seemed to fall over her face then, blanking out all expression. She shrugged. "So?"

"Are you working at The Club now?"

Fear, distaste and shame all flashed in her eyes before they went blank again. If Cassidy hadn't been watching closely, he'd never have seen it. "No." She shook her head. "I don't work there any longer. Haven't since Jethro was murdered."

"Were you two close?" She had called him Jethro, not Mr. Prince. Cassidy didn't like the way his stomach clenched or his shoulders tensed. He wanted to be wrong, but suspected he wasn't.

She laughed bitterly. "Some would say so."

"But you wouldn't?" He kept his tone non-threatening, nonjudgmental, even though it was difficult. For some stupid reason he felt betrayed by her relationship with Prince. Which was ridiculous since he'd only met the woman a day ago.

"No. Our relationship was strictly business."

She was lying. He could feel it in his gut, but he let it go for now. "So how did you find out about Adrian Prince's plans to harm the Dalakis family?" Blythe was still tense, but she relaxed slightly with the change of subject. Interesting.

"I got a call from an accountant saying that there was a new owner who was paying the employees what they were owed from when the club unexpectedly closed down. I was told the new owner was trying to entice some of the old staff back to work there."

"But it didn't work?"

She began to pace, rubbing her hands over her arms as if she were chilled in spite of the fact she was wearing a long-sleeved blue sweater, a pair of jeans and sneakers. "Not for me. The bartender, Barney Amos, was from the old days, but he was the only person I saw other than the accountant, who was a stranger."

Cassidy nodded, ignoring the tight fit of his jeans as he watched the sway of her lush behind while she paced around the confines of the small room. "What about Prince and the other man...what was his name?"

"Saunders. Adrian Prince called him Saunders. And no, I didn't see either of them." She paused by the window next to the table and stared out into the dark. "I heard someone coming and ducked into a storage closet."

She hugged herself tighter. Cassidy wanted to go and stand behind her and wrap his arms around her, warming her and assuring her that she was safe. He did neither.

"I didn't want to run into anyone. It was bad enough just having to go back to that place. If I hadn't needed the money..." She shook her head and sucked in a deep breath. "Anyway, they paused right outside the door and I heard their conversation. End of story."

Every muscle in his body was tense enough to snap. "They had no idea you were there?"

"Of course not." Blythe whirled around with a scowl on her face. "I waited a minute and then went back out through the bar, told Barney I'd taken a look around the old dressing rooms for old times' sake."

"He believed you?"

"I'm sure he did." But although her words were firm, Cassidy could tell she was no longer certain.

"Why did you write the note to Lucian?"

Blythe shrugged. "It was the right thing to do. I couldn't let him hurt innocent people if I could help it. The Prince brothers have hurt too many people." Her voice faded as she drifted off into thought.

Cassidy's mind began to work furiously, sorting through all the facts. When Prince found out his men were gone, he was going to suspect that the Dalakis family had something to do with it. He'd also suspect that they'd somehow known about his planned attack. The list would be short. The first person Prince would question would be his staff, including the bartender. Cassidy suspected that the man would give Blythe up in a heartbeat to save himself. He'd remember that she came from out back just after Prince and his associate, Saunders, had been down that way.

"You have to come with me." Cassidy stood and held his hand out to her. Her eyes widened and she stared at him like he was out of his mind.

"No." She backed away from him until she hit the wall. There was nowhere else for her to go.

"Blythe." He wanted to soften his tone, but she needed to understand the seriousness of the situation. She needed to be afraid. "Two of Adrian Prince's men have already been taken care of. He's going to be angry and suspicious and want to know how the Dalakis family found out about the planned attack. He's going to start questioning people. If he suspects there's a leak in his organization, he's going to plug it. Who do you think he'll talk to?"

She shrugged, although he could see the dawning comprehension.

"He'll talk to the accountant and the bartender," he continued ruthlessly. "If he's smart, he'll figure out you were still in the building when he and Saunders were talking. If nothing else, he'll want to talk to you."

Men like Adrian Prince didn't just *talk* to people and they both knew it. Blythe began to shake. Cassidy thought it was with fear and started to soothe her. Before he could open his mouth, she erupted.

"It's not fair. I thought that with Jethro dead I was free from that place, from that family." Deep rage vibrated in every single word and Cassidy realized that Blythe was more angry than frightened. Her blue eyes blazed. "Haven't they taken enough from me?" she all but spat.

"I don't know," he answered quietly. "Have they?" He had no idea what had gone on the year that she'd worked for the elder Prince, but he sure as hell was certain that whatever it was, it hadn't been good. At least not for Blythe. The possibilities were endless and enough to curdle his blood.

She shook her head. "Thanks for the warning. You can go now." Striding to the door, she yanked it open. Cassidy rubbed his hand over his face. Every instinct he had was telling him to toss her over his shoulder and drag her out of here. But even he

couldn't get away with something that outrageous. It would be kidnapping, plain and simple. The fact that he was even considering it gave him pause. Somehow, this woman had gotten under his skin. Not good.

He walked slowly to the door, trying to think of something he could say, anything that would convince her to go with him. "You know where to find me if you need help."

If anything, her back stiffened even more at his words. "I can take care of myself. Besides," she sneered. "There's always a price to be paid for a man's help."

"Is that what Prince did? Make you pay for his help?"

Her face paled, but she didn't flinch. "It was more complicated than that and none of your business. It's old news. Dead news." Her voice had a flat, dull edge that bothered him. This was a woman near the end of her rope.

Cassidy raised his hand and she flinched before she could stop herself. She straightened her shoulders and met his gaze dead-on. Ever-so slowly, he cupped her cheek, his fingers brushing the silky softness of her skin. She stood still, not moving, barely even breathing. "If you change your mind or need help, just call me. No strings." Leaning down, he brushed his lips over hers. They were soft and slightly moist where she'd chewed on her bottom one. He pulled away, not wanting to frighten her. She was watching him with a strange expression on her face. She looked totally bewildered as he tucked a white business card in her hand. "If you need anything or just want to talk, I'm only a phone call away."

Blythe recovered quickly, hiding her unease and uncertainty behind a false smile. Her fingers tightened around the card, crumpling it. "Sure."

Sighing, Cassidy walked out the door, wishing he could find the words to make her leave with him. Really, what she did was none of his business. She'd come forward with information about a threat and he'd found out all he could from her. If she wanted to stay where she was, it was her business.

"Lock the door behind me," he growled. He stood outside her door and waited until all the locks were engaged. For a woman who claimed she wasn't afraid, she had a heck of a lot of locks. It was a struggle for Cassidy to make himself walk down the stairs and out the front door, but he did it.

What he couldn't do was make himself leave. Not quite yet. He turned and saw the curtain at her window twitching and knew she was up there alone, watching him. Fading into the shadows, Cassidy watched her building. After about a half-hour, he'd convinced himself that she wasn't going anywhere tonight. He'd come back tomorrow and check on her.

He was just about to walk away when a dark sedan pulled up outside the house. Two very large men got out, glanced around and then strolled up the walkway. Cassidy's gut clenched. These men weren't here to visit friends. They were here on business and Cassidy was afraid he knew exactly what their business was.

He skirted the traffic, cursing when he had to stop for an old lady who almost ran him over. He dashed back across the road, yanking his cell phone out of his back pocket as he went. It was answered on the first ring as he quietly opened the front door and started up the stairs. "We have a problem."

Chapter Ten

Sophia stared at Zane, her heart beating faster with each passing second. He moved in closer. Perched on the edge of the desk as she was, his thighs pushed her legs apart. His eyes never lost contact with hers as he slipped the button of her jeans open. "Zane?" She wasn't quite sure what she was asking him. He just smiled and leaned closer.

Her mouth parted on a sigh as he licked her bottom lip. "I'm a man of my word." His husky whisper made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end. He'd promised her several things last night. The tiny pinpricks at the back of her neck began to tingle and she absently touched it with her hand. Zane's eyes narrowed. "I won't drink from you again if you don't want me to."

She thought about that, rubbing her fingers over the slight bumps. Her stomach fluttered and her pussy clenched. From what she could remember from last evening, the experience had been overwhelmingly erotic.

Zane covered her hand with his, stilling her motions. "You don't have to decide now." Bringing her fingers to his lips, he kissed each of her knuckles in turn before opening his mouth and sliding one of them inside. Wet warmth surrounded her finger as he gently scraped his teeth across her skin. Liquid flowed from her core, reminding her quite vividly that she wanted him like she never had any other man.

He slowly pulled her finger from his mouth, nipping playfully at the tip before releasing it. Reaching down, he grasped the hem of her pullover and tugged it over her head. He smiled when he saw her plain white cotton bra. "Did you think that this would stop me?" He traced the unadorned edges with his finger, circling the soft cup. She bit her lip to keep from asking him to touch her. Her nipples were so tight, even the light fabric of her bra was pure torture where it touched them.

She shook her head, barely able to follow the conversation. Need pulsed through her body, thick and rich.

"No?" Zane continued on, his tone almost conversational. "Then why did you wear one?"

All her insecurities welled up and she crossed her arms defensively across her chest, ignoring his frown when she knocked his hand away. "I know I don't really need one."

His scowl deepened. "That wasn't a comment on your size, Sophia. I thought we'd been through this already."

She shrugged and glanced away, trying to figure a graceful way out of this situation.

"Sophia." Zane's tone was soft, beguiling. "Size doesn't matter." He slowly pulled her arms from her chest and covered her breasts with his hands. His palms covered her totally. "You are so damn responsive."

Her embarrassment was forgotten as desire surged through her. The awe in his voice was real and the look in his eyes was one of pure pleasure. She licked her suddenly dry lips and started to speak, but Zane shook his head.

"You don't need to say anything." He massaged her breasts through the thin cotton. "You don't need to do anything." His thumbs brushed over her distended nipples, making them pucker even tighter. "All you have to do is let me pleasure you." His clever fingers unhooked the front closure and the material pulled back, exposing her to him. "Will you let me do that for you, Sophia?"

She nodded. "Yes."

He smiled then. A real smile that made him look even more handsome and slightly vulnerable. It was in that split second that she realized that he understood loneliness, knew it better than even she did. After all, he'd been alone for far more years than she could even comprehend.

Sophia slid her hands around his wrists. They were thick and almost twice the size of her own. She moved her fingers over his muscled forearms, feeling the tension in them. He was once again wearing a black T-shirt that strained against the girth of his biceps. She slipped her hands beneath the short sleeves, pushing them up as she continued her quest. She wanted to see him, to touch him.

As if reading her mind, he pulled back and yanked the shirt over his head and dropped it on the floor behind him. He was even better than she remembered. Last night, the light had been dim, but tonight, under the bright lights of her office, she could see every gorgeous, hard inch of him.

Even though she'd seen his chest last night, she was surprised once again by the fact that his skin wasn't at all pale. There was a neat patch of dark hair in the center of his chest that angled downward toward the top button of his black jeans. He could make a fortune as a male model. Women would drool just staring at his picture. Jealousy, hot and potent, flooded her at the thought of other women seeing him this way. He was hers.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she tugged him closer. "Touch me," she whispered as she nibbled on his bottom lip.

He stood there, frozen like a statue. Sophia started to pull back, wondering what was wrong. He came alive suddenly, swiping papers from her desk in one mighty brush of his arm as he lowered her until her back was against the hard wood. His mouth covered hers, consuming her lips, sucking the air from her lungs until they were burning with need. When Zane finally broke away, they both were gasping for air.

Taking a step back, he picked up one foot and removed her sneaker and sock. Then he did the same with the other. The thud sounded extra loud as her second sneaker hit the floor. The expression on his face should have frightened her. This was a man who

would take whatever he wanted. He wouldn't be denied. Instead, she felt sexy and powerful. Her jeans felt tight and confining. She wanted to be naked. Wanted him to see her, to touch her everywhere.

He was taking too long. She yanked down the zipper of her jeans. Zane growled with pleasure as she began to push the fabric over her hips. Swooping down, he nipped at her hipbones, making her gasp. His tongue stroked over her stomach, dipping into her bellybutton.

His larger hands pushed hers aside as he finished what she'd started. He quickly skimmed her jeans and panties down her legs and over her ankles, leaving her naked except for the bra that was caught around her arms.

Zane wrapped his arms beneath her thighs and buried his face against her pubic hair, inhaling deeply. Sophia braced herself on her forearms, enthralled by the sight of his dark hair brushing her stomach. She could feel his hot breath on her skin as he shifted. He raised his head and moved forward until his mouth hovered over one of her breasts. With his arms still under her thighs, the action pushed her legs high and wide, leaving her exposed.

She whimpered with need as he lapped at her nipple, circling it lightly and then pressing hard against the tip. "I could almost make you come just by playing with your breasts. Do you have any idea how amazing that is?"

All she could do was whimper as lightning shot from her breasts to her core. Cream seeped from her slit and ran down the cleft of her behind.

He caught her nipple between his teeth and tugged gently. Sophia swore she could see stars as the world around her disappeared. Each tug on her nipple made her vagina clench with agonizing need.

"Zane," she panted. "More."

He covered her breast with his mouth and sucked hard. Leaning his pelvis against hers, he ground his heavy erection against her. The rough fabric of his jeans and the hardness of his shaft excited her. The fact that she was naked and he wasn't added an element of excitement, driving her even higher.

She tried to wrap her legs around him, but he shifted his arms, widening them. There was nothing she could do. Zane was in control of her pleasure. All she could do was hold on and enjoy the ride.

He tore his mouth from her breast and she cried out at the loss. She was panting hard now. She was so close. She could feel it in the way her body tensed. Waiting.

"Tell me what you want." He nuzzled the damp skin between her breasts.

"Touch me," she moaned.

"Where?" His tongue snaked down her torso. "How?"

Sophia had never asked a man to do things to her before she'd met Zane. He was so unabashedly sexual and raw. Embarrassment had no place between them.

"Between my legs," she panted as his head moved lower. "Touch me with your mouth. Your fingers."

A warm brush of air was the only warning she got as he plunged his face between her thighs. His tongue stabbed into her core. She fell back onto the desk, her arms giving out beneath the sensual onslaught. Her fingers gripped the edge of the desk as he licked up one side of her labia and down the other. "Oh God," she moaned as his tongue flicked over her swollen clitoris. "Harder."

Zane laughed. She could feel his lips form a smile before he captured her clit and sucked. Blood rushed through her body. She could feel a dull roar in her ears and was helpless to stop her climax as it slammed through her. Her body bucked, seeking his hardness, but met only air. Even as she orgasmed, she felt empty and alone.

Her body shook and shuddered. Cream flowed from her core. A tear slipped from the corner of her eye and she leaned her head over to wipe it against her shoulder. She sniffed and Zane's head shot up from between her legs. She could see the concern in his eyes as he lowered her legs, letting them hang over the edge of the desk. "Sophia?"

She didn't have the words. Instead, she opened her arms to him. He leaned down and kissed her softly as he murmured his thanks to her. The movement brought his erection back in contact with her sensitive flesh, making her flinch. He started to shift away, but she latched onto the loops of his jeans, holding him close.

She wrapped her legs around his hips as her fingers tugged at his button and zipper. Zane buried his face in her neck and shuddered. Finally, she got his zipper down and his underwear shoved to one side. His cock fell into her waiting hand and she squeezed gently. He groaned and raised his head. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." She nodded for emphasis. She'd never been so sure about anything in her life. "We need protection." They hadn't used anything last night, but that was no reason to be stupid.

Zane traced his finger over her cheek. She could see the humor in his eyes and the slight grin that tugged at his lips. "Vampires don't have human diseases, so you're safe."

"What about pregnancy?" Truthfully, she hadn't been thinking about communicable diseases, which was stupid on her part in this day and age. All she'd been thinking about was the possibility of getting pregnant.

He shook his head. "I've never known a vampire to get a woman pregnant. You'd have to be converted to a vampire in order for that to happen."

"Oh." Sophia had no idea why she felt let down by that idea. She wasn't ready to have a baby, especially not with a man she'd just met and barely knew. Except she really didn't feel that way about Zane. She felt as if she'd known him forever.

His cock flexed in her hand and all else was forgotten in the blast of heat that flashed through her body, pooling between her thighs. Zane pushed his shaft against her palm. "Do you want me, Sophia?" His hands covered her breasts, kneading the pliant flesh. "You're so hot and wet." His fingers tweaked her nipples, causing another

contraction in her womb. "I want to fuck you until we both scream." Her fingers tightened around him, making him groan. "And if you don't stop that, it will be over before it even begins."

Zane gritted his teeth as Sophia slid her fingers down his thick shaft and found the heavy sac hanging beneath. She was all but purring beneath him. He could feel her pleasure and knew that she liked the idea that he was as responsive to her as she was to him. As she gently massaged his balls, he bit back a groan.

A sheen of sweat covered him as his balls drew up closer to his body. He was out of time. He wanted to be inside her when he came. Wanted to feel her body close around his as she found her release again.

He shifted his hips away and she gave his scrotum one final squeeze before she released him. He laughed and groaned at the same time. The little witch was teasing him.

He positioned himself so that just the head of his cock was inside her. Her inner muscles squeezed the tip and he tensed. It took all his concentration not to come. He wanted to make sure that she found her pleasure again. Only then would he take his.

"Zane." He loved the way she said his name. Her voice was slightly breathy and filled with desire. "I want it all. Everything."

There was no mistaking what she was offering him. That she would give herself so generously after what he'd done the night before rocked him to his core. The bloodlust that had been lurking just below the surface surged to life like a wild animal set free from its shackles, sensing that its needs would soon be met.

The delicious smell of her desire was like a drug, filling his nostrils and his mouth. He could still taste her on his lips. A red haze filled his brain, blocking out all else but the desire to fulfill his needs.

He felt his fangs lengthening as he thrust his shaft deep, burying himself to the hilt in her wet heat. Contractions rippled through Sophia, encompassing his cock from tip to base. Burying his face in her neck, he wrapped his arms around her shoulders, holding her tight as he withdrew almost the entire way before driving himself deep. She was so soft where he was hard. She was life where he was death. She was warmth and he'd been so very cold.

Sophia's legs tightened around his flanks, holding him close. Her arms curled around his and her hands clung to his slick shoulders. She lifted her hips to meet his every thrust, which got harder and more frequent until he was pounding into her with the force of a jackhammer. He couldn't stop. Blood surged through his body, his head pounding with the force of his need for her. He would never have enough of her no matter how many times he had her.

He could hear the rush of her blood as it hurried through her veins. Could hear her cries of delight as her orgasm crept closer. Could smell her musk and taste the salt of her skin as he licked her neck.

Sophia belonged to him and he'd do everything in his power to keep her.

He shook his head to try to clear it, but the red haze of bloodlust, of sheer sexual need wrapped itself around him, shutting out all else. Zane had to mark her, claim her again and again. He continued to drive himself into her, pushing them both higher and higher.

She screamed his name. Her voice echoed in the room, echoed through him. He yelled her name as he came, shooting hot streams of cum deep into her. Her pussy clamped down hard as she came, making him yell out again. He continued to shake and shudder over Sophia, the strength of her orgasm making his own even sharper. He could feel the force of her emotions combining with his own.

His teeth ached and he growled as he licked the succulent flesh of her neck. Sophia arched back her neck, offering him her very lifeblood. Unable and unwilling to resist, he sank his fangs deep. She jerked slightly and then relaxed as he began to suck. Her blood gushed into his mouth and he groaned. God, she tasted unbelievable. Every cell in his body rushed to soak up her essence.

Beneath him, she continued to convulse, her pussy squeezing him tight with every pull his mouth made on her neck. His cock twitched inside her, prolonging his pleasure. She moaned softly and he stilled. He would not have a repeat of the night before. Carefully, he withdrew his sharp teeth and swiped his tongue over the small puncture marks. He kissed the tiny wounds and raised his head.

Sophia looked up at him, soft and sated. A smile played around the corners of her mouth even as her eyes fluttered shut. With a faint sigh, she relaxed. Zane knew she couldn't be all that comfortable against the hard, wooden desk and knew he had to move.

It wasn't easy, but he pulled his cock out of her. He should have been soft by now, but instead, he was still as hard as rock. Sophia's breath caught, but then she sighed. Hitching his underwear and jeans back into position, he tugged up his zipper. He didn't bother with his shirt, but instead leaned down and lifted Sophia into his arms. She snuggled close to him, nuzzling his chest as he sat down in the desk chair with her in his arms.

They sat there, both of them content to just be in the moment. He felt no need to say anything. The slight weight of Sophia resting against his chest brought him a deep, abiding peace, which was amazing considering how out of control she'd also made him feel.

He knew they'd have to move soon. They both had work to do tonight, but Zane was loath to be the one to break the intimate mood between them. He was trying to decide how to proceed when a shrill ring cut the air. The real world was intruding.

Sophia's eyes shot open as she sat up, reaching for the phone. She blinked and it took her a moment to find her phone, as it had been pushed to the far side of the desk. They were lucky it hadn't landed on the floor.

She reached for it and Zane suddenly stopped her. "Put it on speakerphone or tape it."

Sophia nodded and pressed several buttons. "Hello." Her voice was husky, reminding Zane of what they'd just done.

She froze, her entire body stiffening. Zane's muscles locked tight as the distorted voice came across the speaker. "You disappointed me, Ms. Daring. I all but handed you the murderer and yet no one has taken anyone in for questioning."

All softness disappeared from Sophia's voice. "Yeah, well, it was a bit too easy. How do I know that you're not the guilty party?"

"You don't." Zane could hear the malice mixed with humor in the man's voice. "You're a very smart lady, Ms. Daring. Maybe too smart for your own good." And he was suddenly very sure that it was a male, in spite of the attempt to cover up gender. "Maybe you need more proof." The phone clicked dead before Sophia could ask anything else.

She turned off her phone and swiveled to look at him. "He's the murderer."

Zane had come to the very same conclusion. "Why do you think so?" He wanted to know what she was thinking. Hoping they were both wrong in their conclusion.

She chewed on her bottom lip and her eyes that had been filled with such pleasure and contentment only moments ago were now filled with dread and worry. "He's enjoying this way too much. You could hear the pleasure in his voice." She shivered and Zane cursed, wrapping his arms around her. "He's going to kill again."

Zane sighed, knowing Sophia was right. He'd sensed the same thing. This killer enjoyed what he did and, for some unknown reason, wanted to frame the Dalakis family for his crimes. "I know." He also knew there was nothing either of them could do to stop him.

"I have to call the police and tell them that I had another phone call."

Zane nodded, his mind shifting gears. "I have to go and talk to the Dalakis family. I may not be convinced of their innocence in everything, but they need to know they have an enemy who'll go to any lengths to hurt them."

Sophia suddenly seemed to realize she was naked. She jumped out of his lap and grabbed her underwear, tugging it on. Then she wrestled with the twisted ends of her bra. When they wouldn't straighten themselves out, she yanked the bra off, tossing it aside in frustration. Then she hunted around until she found her pullover and slipped it on.

Zane reached to the floor and picked up his T-shirt. Standing, he turned the shirt right side out again and pulled it on while he watched Sophia finish dressing. He touched her shoulder, stopping her before she could get out of arm's reach. She stilled, her gaze flying to his. He started to speak, but she stopped him.

"We don't have time to talk right now. Not about what just happened, or what seems to be going on between us. Right now, we have to focus on the murder and the

mystery with the Dalakis family. If we tell the cops about the call and then go and see the Dalakis brothers ourselves, maybe we can come up with the real murderer. Maybe we can stop him before he kills someone else."

He could tell she didn't truly believe there was any way to stop this madman from striking again, but knew that they had to try. If they didn't, neither one of them would be able to live with themselves.

"Make your call and do whatever else you need to do. We'll leave as soon as you're ready." She nodded and started to walk away, but he tugged her back. His arms banded around her as he leaned down and kissed her. He could feel her softening in his embrace and relaxed slightly as he let her go. "This is not over. Not by a long shot." She nodded and he knew she understood that he was talking about them and not the murder.

He watched as she hurried out of the room. "It might never be over," he muttered beneath his breath.

Chapter Eleven

Blythe leaned back against the door and drew in a deep breath. She hadn't expected the man she'd struggled with last night to find her, but Sam Cassidy was obviously a very smart and resourceful man. Naïvely, she'd believed she could deliver the message to the Dalakis family and avoid detection. How was it the old saying went? "No good deed goes unpunished?" Well, she was through with being the one on the short end of the stick all the time. She'd more than paid for the mistakes she'd made in her life.

Shuddering, she pushed away from the door. It was amazing just how difficult it was for her not to confide in Cassidy. The man exuded a confidence, a solidness that made her want to lean on him, if only for a moment. Of course, she hadn't. She'd learned at a very young age, when her father had abandoned her and her mother, that men couldn't be depended on.

She walked to the window and peeked around the curtain just in time to see Cassidy disappear into the shadows across the street. The edges of the business card he'd given her dug into her palm. Angry with herself for even considering using it, she stomped over to the garbage can and dropped it inside. Slamming the lid shut, she began to pace. Her gaze kept wandering back to the garbage can until she couldn't stand it any longer. Marching back over to the tiny kitchen area, she flipped up the lid and pulled out the card, tucking it in her back pocket. She'd just keep it for a few days. Just in case.

Taking the few steps necessary to reach her chair, she flung herself down into it. Maybe she should leave the city. After all, there wasn't anything holding her here any longer. Her mother had wanted to live out the last of her days in the city she'd been born and lived in her entire life, but her mother was dead now. She'd succumbed to her cancer just a month ago. Blythe was free to travel anywhere she chose. She just didn't know where to go.

Rubbing her tired eyes, she contemplated her options. As much as she didn't want to admit it, Cassidy was right. This city would get more dangerous for her now that Adrian Prince had taken over The Club. She stared at her meager surroundings. She didn't really have much that she'd want to take with her. Clothing, some pictures and a few personal effects. Anything she'd had of value had been sold long ago to pay for her mother's treatment and finally her burial. But it was done and Blythe was free of obligation to anyone but herself.

She was tired, she realized as she closed her eyes and rested her head against the soft back of the chair. Tired of always having to be the one in charge, the one everyone else depended on. Her mother had been a fragile woman for as long as Blythe could remember. Even as a child, she'd been the one to take care of the rent and bills, cooking

and cleaning. Her mother had managed to hold down a job as a waitress, but as soon as she'd gotten sick, everything had fallen to Blythe.

Not that she'd minded. She'd loved her mother. And she was no stranger to hard work. She'd had her first job by the time she was twelve, babysitting other kids and walking neighbors' dogs. She'd always made her own money to keep herself clothed and in school. At twenty-five, she had her entire life ahead of her and didn't know what she wanted to do.

Something to think about, she mused as she opened her eyes. And if she was leaving town, she needed to pack. Dragging herself out of her comfortable chair, she walked to the armoire and dug out two large tote bags. She didn't own a suitcase, but a couple of these should do the trick.

Dumping them both on the futon, she went back to the armoire for the first load of clothing. Someone knocked hard on her door, the loud thump making her jump. She scowled in its direction. For a woman who never had company, her apartment was certainly a popular place tonight. "Who is it?" she called, but no one answered. It was probably only Sam Cassidy again.

She moved cautiously toward the door. It was probably just Cassidy again, but she couldn't be certain. Biting her lower lip, she debated the wisdom of calling out. Not for the first time, she wished her cheap landlord had installed a peephole in the door.

Silence.

A loud crack filled the air as her door was hit hard. The doorframe split, but the locks held. It was hit again. This time harder. It wasn't Sam Cassidy outside her door and Blythe wasn't about to stick around to find out who it was.

Grabbing her purse, she hurried toward the window, not even sparing a glance for her clothing. Clothing could be replaced—her life couldn't. She did pause long enough to grab a tattered journal and stuff it in her bag.

The wooden door groaned as it was hit again. The locks still held, but the hinges didn't. The door was shoved inward and a huge man in a three-piece suit stepped into the room. She didn't recognize him, but she knew the type. This man was an enforcer and it wasn't too far a mental stretch to know who he worked for.

Digging her fingers into the wood, she shoved the window up and threw one leg over the sill. The man practically dove across the room, grabbing her leg and yanking her back in. She hit the floor hard, knocking the wind out of her body. The man pulled her to her feet, his fingers digging into her upper arm. She knew she'd have a massive bruise there, but she ignored the pain. She had bigger problems than that. The man and his buddy, who'd joined him in the room, both had handguns and they looked more than capable of using them.

"Going somewhere?" the first man asked. He was big, with a shock of short gray hair and a pug nose.

She shrugged, trying to appear calm, which wasn't easy with these two big men surrounding her. "I wasn't expecting company."

"I don't think she likes us, Tom." The younger man glared at her as the older man continued. "Our boss wants to talk to you."

"Who's your boss?"

The older man backhanded her, letting go of her arm at the last second so she went flying again. She landed on the coffee table and bounced to the floor, striking her elbow, hip and head.

This time it was Tom who grabbed her and pulled her to her feet. "You know Mr. Prince, don't you, sweet thing?"

Blythe nodded. "Heard he was dead."

Tom shook her so hard her teeth rattled. "Not him — Adrian Prince."

"Never met him." Blythe had no idea why she was baiting these men, but she couldn't stop herself. Tired of being a victim for so long, she was fighting back. This time there was only herself to worry about and if they were going to kill her, she'd just as soon they do it quick. In the meantime, if she could make them angry, they might make a mistake. That is, if they didn't kill her first.

The older man shook his head as he strolled over and caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger. "You'll meet him tonight." He released his grip on her face and let his hand slide over her collarbone. She swallowed hard, trying desperately not to give in to the panic that threatened to overwhelm her. His large hand covered her breast, squeezing tight.

Blythe brought her knee up hard and fast even as she lifted her other leg, making herself a deadweight. The older man doubled over and Tom lost his grip on her. Blythe tried to scramble away. The door was only a few feet away. She could make it.

She got one foot on the floor and was pushing herself upright when a hand caught her back leg and yanked. She landed flat on the floor. Blood spurted from her nose.

A sound almost like a cough reached her ears. Another one quickly followed. The hand on her leg loosened enough for her to kick it away. She crawled quickly toward the door, but it was blocked.

Her gaze flew upward, colliding with another massive man. This one she recognized. Big and blond, he filled the doorway, a gun with a silencer attached to the end of the barrel held firm in his hand. Unlike the other men, he wasn't wearing a suit, but boots, faded blue jeans and a crisp, white shirt. His blue eyes were like ice as he glanced down at her, making her shiver. Sam Cassidy had returned and she'd never been so glad to see a man in her life.

"Blythe, come here." He kept his eyes trained on the other side of the room. She glanced over her shoulder and shivered. The older man was lying on the floor, while Tom was standing with his hands upright. No one had yelled, she suddenly realized, even though it was obvious Cassidy had shot one of her attackers. That's because they were all professionals, she suddenly realized. Oh God, who was Sam Cassidy, really?

Tom was poised for action and Blythe knew she wasn't safe yet. At this moment, Cassidy was definitely the lesser of the two evils. She pushed herself upright, careful to stay out of Cassidy's line of fire. She wasn't sure how he planned to get them out of this situation, short of shooting the other man. The neighbors must have heard something by now. Surely it was only a matter of time until the police arrived.

But the night sounds drifting in through the window carried only the cry of a distant siren. She could hear someone yelling down the street, but that was all. The air in the room seemed to thicken and a man stepped out from the shadows. Dressed all in black, he radiated a menace that permeated the entire room.

Blythe gasped and flattened herself against the wall as he approached her. She'd thought the other men were large, but this man was beyond big. He was huge. But it was more than his size. There was something about him that was deadly. His long black hair was pulled back over his wide shoulders. His face was all angles and planes, but it was his eyes that were the most frightening. Green as emeralds, they glittered with the promise of retribution.

She shivered as he sauntered toward her. She tried not to flinch away when his hand reached out to her, but she couldn't help herself. His finger was gentle as it traced the bruise on her cheek. A white handkerchief was pressed into her hand as he stepped back and offered her a slight bow. "My name is Stefan Dalakis and I am sorry for the problems that helping my family has brought to you." His voice was tinged with an accent she couldn't place. His words and phrasing had a slightly old-fashioned feel to them.

She nodded and raised the crisp, white handkerchief to her nose. A hand rested on her shoulder, making her jump. Cassidy. She recognized the clean, masculine scent from earlier this evening. He was staring down at her with concern in his eyes. Her gaze flew to the other men. Had they forgotten about them?

Tom was sitting quietly on a kitchen chair with his hands on his knees. His eyes were totally blank. What the heck was going on? The other man was still lying on the floor, not moving. Was he dead?

"Not yet," Stefan answered. Had he read her thoughts? She rubbed her forehead with her hand. Maybe she'd hit her head harder than she'd realized. He turned to Cassidy. "Sorry it took me so long to get here, but I had to leave without the ladies knowing."

"They aren't alone, are they?" Blythe could hear the concern in Cassidy's voice and was struck with jealousy that he seemed so concerned about these other women. Now she knew she'd hit her head too hard. This wasn't like her at all.

Keeping a cautious eye on the two enforcers, who for the moment seemed to be subdued, she sidled closer to the bed. At least she tried to. It ended up being more of a drunken sway. Giving her nose one final swipe, she dropped the bloody piece of cloth to the bed. Thankfully, it had stopped bleeding. Opening the tote bags, she watched the

men out of the corner of her eye as she turned back to the armoire and began to unload her clothing.

"No, the women are not alone. Lucian is with them." Blythe tried to ignore the conversation going on behind her. She wanted to know who the other women were and what connection they had to Cassidy, which was crazy. She didn't have a connection to Sam Cassidy. Why should she care?

"What are you doing?" Cassidy's voice was even, but she could hear the concern beneath it.

"What does it look like?" She finished emptying the drawers onto the bed and then began to stuff clothing into the two bags. "I'm packing. Obviously I can't stay here any longer."

"You were packing even before they got here, weren't you?" Cassidy motioned to the other men.

"I'd thought about what you said." She grabbed a handful of silky underwear and shoved it in the bag, hoping he didn't notice what it was. Why she felt embarrassed over the thought of him seeing her panties, she didn't know. There was a man bleeding on her floor and she was concerned about him seeing her underwear. She shook her head, ignoring the shaft of pain that movement caused. "I decided it was better to leave town."

"That's impossible now, you know." His matter-of-fact tone made her angry.

"No it's not. I can disappear in any city in this country. All I have to do is leave."

"It takes money to disappear. Do you have any?"

Just like a man to hit her while she was down, she thought bitterly. "Not your problem, is it?" Zipping both bags, she ignored the roomful of men as she picked up her purse and checked the contents. She had her bankcard and her wallet. Other than her clothing and her journal, she didn't need anything else.

Stefan stepped forward and she eyed him warily. This man gave her the willies. "I beg to differ. It is my problem or, rather, my family's problem. If you hadn't warned us about Prince's plans, my family might have been hurt and you would not be in danger." His green eyes glittered and for a second appeared to be tinged with red. Blythe took a step back and banged into Cassidy, who was standing right behind her.

She shrugged. "I did what I had to do. Now all I have to do is leave town. It's no longer your business."

Stefan frowned as if he weren't used to anyone telling him basically to mind his own business. Blythe knew the type. She'd also done her research, searching the database at the library before she'd approached the Dalakis family. Both Stefan and his brother were rich and powerful and used to people doing what they wanted. She'd had enough of those kinds of men.

"Of course it is my business. If nothing else, you have my gratitude."

Blythe was tired and getting more woozy by the second. She had to leave while she still had the strength to take herself to a hotel for the night. She'd leave town on the bus first thing in the morning. "Fine. You've said thank you. Cassidy saved my life tonight, so we're even."

Stefan smiled. "You remind me of my wife. Laurel Rose has your kind of spirit. Most annoying at times."

But the man appeared anything but annoyed. His entire face softened as he talked about his wife. What must it be like to be loved like that? Maybe she'd find out someday, but she doubted it. That kind of devotion was rare.

Grabbing her tote bags, she dragged them off the bed. Cassidy removed them from her hand before she could protest. "You're not going off by yourself tonight."

"I'm sick of men telling me what I can and can't do." She'd leave the damn clothing behind. She could always buy new. Most of it had come from thrift stores anyway. She'd given away or sold the clothing that Jethro Prince had made her wear. The intimate apparel she'd burned.

Hiking her purse strap over her shoulder, she tried to head to the door, but Cassidy stepped in front of her. "Be reasonable." He stared down at her, his blue eyes filled with concern. She couldn't buy into it, couldn't believe it was real. He might be concerned tonight, but what about two nights from now, or a week from now, when this situation was out of control? Adrian Prince would not give up and just go away.

"I am being reasonable. You're the one who isn't thinking straight. Prince won't stop until he finds me, especially not now." She glanced over at the men. Tom was still sitting there, just staring. "And what the hell did you do to him?"

Stefan stepped forward. "He is not hurt. At least not yet." His voice was silken, but filled with a menace that chilled Blythe to the bone. "I want to question him. I need to find out what Prince plans to do to my family." This was a man you did not want as an enemy. Blythe almost pitied Adrian Prince. Almost. The truth was the man deserved whatever he got.

"Fine. Good. Whatever." She noted that Stefan hadn't told her what he'd done to the man and she decided that she didn't really need to know. She tried to push past Sam, but he wouldn't step aside. "Look, you need to get out of the way so I can leave."

"I can't do that." With his hands on his hips and the scowl on his face, Cassidy looked almost as fierce as Stefan, but she wasn't afraid of him. Instead, she was filled with the silly notion that she wanted to soothe the scowl from his face. She wondered what it would feel like to have his strong arms wrapped around her, protecting her.

And then they were there. He pulled her close to him, pressing her head gently against his chest. She could feel the solid muscle beneath his shirt, hear the deep thud of his heart against her ear. It was comforting. She allowed herself to lean against him, closing her eyes and breathing in his masculine scent.

Blythe hadn't wanted a man. Ever. Had, in fact, been accused on many occasions of being frigid. And after what had happened with Jethro Prince, she'd never expected to feel the bite of desire.

But there was something about Sam Cassidy that made her wish she were another woman. A woman without her jaded past, a woman who could give herself to a man, a woman who could find pleasure with a man. But she wasn't and no amount of wishing would change what she was.

Pushing away from Cassidy, she steeled herself to do whatever she had to, say whatever she had to, in order to get away. She'd gotten good at lying to others, and to herself, these past years.

Cassidy gently pushed a lock of her blonde hair out of her eyes. "Just for tonight. Come and stay at the house for the rest of the night. Lucian and the rest of the family want to meet you. You can always leave in the morning if you still want to."

It wasn't as much what he said as the look in his eyes when he said it. She'd never seen that kind of genuine concern in any man's eyes, not when they were looking at her. Because of an act of birth, she'd been born with the kinds of looks that caused men to view her as an object, or prize, to be obtained. They stared at her with covetous eyes, undressing her in their minds. They ogled her with undisguised lust, with anger, but never with concern.

She was tired and her entire body was hurting. She knew she'd have bruises on her back, arm, hip and possibly even her leg. Her face was one massive ache. She didn't think she'd broken her nose, but she knew she'd have bruises in the morning.

"Come home with me, Blythe." Cassidy's voice weakened her resolve. "Let me take care of you. Just for tonight," he coaxed.

"Just for tonight." The words were out of her mouth before she knew she was even thinking them. Damn, she was tired.

He picked up her tote bags and slung them over his shoulder. She could see the gun, back in its holster, tucked beneath his sports jacket. This man had saved her life. "Thank you."

His expression tightened, his eyes hardened, but his touch was gentle as he wrapped his arm lightly around her shoulders, guiding her toward the broken door. "You shouldn't have been in this situation to begin with." She stiffened, thinking he was criticizing her, but she realized she was totally off base when he continued. "I should have prevented it." It was quite a revelation to realize he was angry with himself for not stopping the attack.

"You couldn't have stopped this, Cassidy."

He said nothing as he led her from the room, but his arm tightened ever-so slightly around her. He looked back over his shoulder. "When you've cleaned this up, make sure her door is fixed."

Blythe held her breath, thinking that Cassidy was either very brave or totally crazy to give this man orders. Stefan just gave them a small salute. "I'll see you back at the house."

The trip down the stairs was a blur and then she was being bundled into a car. The leather seats were comfortable and she relaxed, not protesting when Cassidy strapped her seat belt around her. She must have dozed, for it seemed that the car had barely started to move when it stopped again. She blinked and noticed that the driveway looked familiar. He pulled the car into a garage and the door closed quietly behind them.

"Welcome home," he said as he leaned over and brushed his lips over hers.

Chapter Twelve

Cassidy ushered Blythe into the house, shutting and locking the door to the garage behind him. He left her belongings in the car for now. He'd get them later.

He stopped long enough to reset the house alarm. There was no way he was taking any chances. He knew he'd caught her off guard with the kiss, but he wasn't sorry he'd done it. There was something about Blythe that made his heart hurt. She hadn't had an easy life based on what he'd been able to find out about her, and he guessed that what he knew was only the tip of the iceberg.

"You don't live here, do you?" Her eyes widened as he led her through the huge kitchen toward the main hallway. He'd grown accustomed to the place and barely noticed the priceless artwork on the walls or the antique furniture that littered the rooms. But he remembered being awed the first time he'd walked into Lucian Dalakis' home.

"Nah. I live in an apartment above the old carriage house out back. This is the main house where Lucian lives. Stefan, the guy you met earlier, lives next door."

Blythe looked a bit pale to him, the bruises on her face already beginning to bloom. He seethed with anger—at himself and at her attackers. He wanted to lock her away where she'd be safe from harm, but he didn't think she'd go for that. Ah, a man could dream though.

He noticed that she winced as she walked, rubbing her hip. "Your hip hurts?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I hit the coffee table hard when I fell."

Cassidy ground his teeth so hard he made his jaw ache. He hated the fact that she'd gotten hurt and cursed himself for not being quicker. His arm supported her as they entered the library. She was leaning heavily on him now, giving him an idea of just how bad she felt. He'd wanted to take her to a hospital, but knew it wouldn't be safe to do so. Cassidy decided he'd keep an eye on her and, if he felt it necessary, he'd find a doctor he could trust and bring him to the house to examine her.

Blythe came to an abrupt stop. The two women on the sofa glanced their way, while the man leaning against the fireplace pushed away from the mantle and stood staring at them.

"Cassidy, what's happened?" Delight came to her feet and started toward them.

Blythe wished she could sink into the floor and disappear. The man glaring at her from in front of the fireplace had to be Lucian Dalakis. He looked too much like the man she'd met in her apartment to be anything but his brother. Why had she let Cassidy bring her here?

Because your brains were addled when you got hit, a small voice inside her head announced. Her head was pounding and she ached from her toenails to top of her head. All she wanted was some painkillers, a bath and some rest.

The woman who spoke to Cassidy was pretty in a girl-next-door sort of way. She was of average height with light, sandy-brown hair and pale blue eyes. Blythe could see the affection in the woman's gaze as she addressed him. She didn't like that at all.

The second woman slowly came to her feet. She was taller with extremely long, black hair and a pale complexion. This woman's eyes were an impossible color of deep indigo. They were old eyes that saw way too much as they stared at Blythe.

She tugged away from Cassidy, ignoring the scowl he gave her. "I shouldn't have come." She started to back away from the group. The walls of the room were closing in around her. There wasn't enough air for her to breathe. "I have to go." She kept her feet moving backward and came up solid against something. It wasn't a wall.

Slowly, she turned her head around and looked up. Stefan Dalakis was standing behind her, blocking her retreat. "You must stay." His words were more a command than a suggestion and Blythe bristled.

"Listen, I did my part. I warned your family. I don't owe any of you anything." Her breath was coming faster now and her head was spinning. She blinked hard as she suddenly saw two of Stefan. No, not two. The other brother had come to stand beside him.

"But we owe you much." There was a finality to his words that made Blythe shiver. She wasn't getting out of here until they decided to let her go. Okay, she'd let them say their piece and then she'd leave.

"Fine." Trying to appear calm and cool, she sauntered over to a plush chair. It looked comfortable enough and she really needed to sit down before she dropped in a heap. And wouldn't that be dignified?

Cassidy appeared by her side, helping to ease her down into the chair. She bit her lip but was unable to stifle her groan completely. "I need some ice packs," he called over his shoulder. The shorter woman hurried out of the room.

Blythe closed her eyes and sucked in a deep breath as pain washed over her. She could do this, she reminded herself. She'd been through worse and survived. Knowing she couldn't hide indefinitely, she opened her eyes and studied the group surrounding her.

The woman rushed back into the room, ice pack in hand. "Your poor face," she whispered as she carefully laid the kitchen towel filled with ice against Blythe's cheek. "I'm Delight Dalakis."

"Blythe Nixon." Blythe held out her hand.

Delight squeezed it gently. "You're the woman who brought the note last night. Thank you so much for what you did for my family."

"My wife is right. I am Lucian Dalakis. Welcome to our home. I'm just sorry it has to be under such circumstances." She held out her hand again, but instead of shaking it, Lucian brought her fingers to his mouth and kissed them. It was such an old-fashioned gesture that Blythe was charmed.

Stefan stepped forward. "I would like for you to meet my wife, Laurel Rose."

The dark-haired woman offered a smile. "You've suffered much for us. Please let us help you."

Blythe was uncomfortable with all the attention. She'd had too much of that during the year she'd spent with Jethro Prince. He liked to show off his belongings and she'd been considered just another possession of his that other men coveted. She shuddered, trying to shake off the dark past. She had enough trouble in the present to deal with.

She looked to Cassidy for support. His blue eyes were steady as he positioned himself just to her left, crossing his arms over his chest. "Why don't you all sit down and I'll fill you in on what happened."

"Of course," Lucian nodded, with the others murmuring their assent.

They all moved away and sprawled across various sofas and chairs that filled the opulent room. Honestly, this place was like something out of a magazine. Three walls were filled with floor-to-ceiling bookcases, all loaded with books. A massive desk sat at one end of the room while at this end there was a fireplace surrounded by two plush sofas, three chairs and a loveseat. A gigantic coffee table sat in the center of the seating area. The room screamed money.

Now that she wasn't being watched so closely, Blythe began to relax. The ice pack felt good against her throbbing face. Hopefully it would keep the swelling to a minimum.

She studied the people in the room, ignoring the fact that she'd relaxed significantly when she realized the women were married to the Dalakis brothers. That didn't mean that Cassidy didn't have a woman of his own, she reminded herself. Not that she cared.

Oh, damn. She chewed on her bottom lip. She did care. Somehow, somehow, Sam Cassidy had snuck past her walls and defenses and touched the woman beneath the cold exterior. Just being around him made her feel warm and protected. That was so not good. She needed to be strong. To remember that she could only depend on herself.

Blythe lectured herself as she listened to Cassidy with half an ear as he and then Stefan filled the others in on what had happened. "How did you get here so fast?" She sat forward, staring at Stefan.

Cassidy fell silent and once again everyone was staring at her. Too bad. It had suddenly occurred to her that he'd been practically right behind them, which was impossible unless he'd just left both men in her apartment.

Her eyes narrowed. "What did you do?" She pulled herself to her feet. "Did you leave those men at my place?" She didn't wait for an answer. "That's just great. Now the police will be looking for me."

She strode to the door, the need to get away, to distance herself from the crime, paramount on her mind, but somehow Stefan was there ahead of her. She started and fell back a step, only to have a pair of strong arms come around her. Cassidy. She didn't even try to struggle. At this moment she didn't have strength enough to wrestle a kitten.

"You don't understand," Cassidy whispered in her ear.

"Make me understand." She turned away from Cassidy to stare at Stefan. "Make me understand."

Stefan sighed, rubbing his hand across the back of his neck. "The bodies are gone from your apartment. Both men are still alive. Barely. They have been sent back to their boss with no memory of what happened." There was no apology in his gaze as he continued. "Your door is fixed and all bloodstains have been removed from your home. It's as if they never came to your apartment."

"But that's impossible, isn't it?" She shifted her gaze from Stefan to Cassidy. Both their faces were shuttered. They were hiding something from her. "If you're not going to be honest with me, then I'm leaving."

Not that she knew where she was going. She didn't even know where her purse was. She didn't remember Cassidy carrying anything in from the car. Still, she had to get away from these people. Let them keep their secrets. God only knew that she had more than enough of her own.

"You can't leave." Delight had joined them. "You're hurt. You need to rest."

Blythe shook her head. "I appreciate what you want to do, but frankly you're all strangers to me. I don't owe you anything and you don't owe me either. We're even. We're done."

Cassidy tightened his grip around her, but was still careful not to squeeze her too tight. "Blythe, there are things you don't know. Things that could endanger you even more if you knew them."

"Oh shit. You're mafia, right? No!" She shook her head. "Don't tell me."

Stefan chuckled. "No, we're not mafia."

"I wouldn't work for criminals, Blythe." She could hear the pain in Cassidy's voice and knew that she'd inadvertently hurt him with her words. She wanted to yell that she didn't know him at all. But she held back. Because deep inside, she knew he was a good man. The type of man that she hadn't come across much in her lifetime.

"I'm sorry." She placed her hands on his forearms where they crossed over her shoulders and stomach.

His chin rubbed over the top of her head. "I know it's asking a lot, but please just trust me. Just stay for the night."

Once again, she was lost in the comfort of his presence. She wanted the sense of peace and safety that he gave her, even if it was only for one night. "I still don't understand what's going on. I mean, I understand what's going on between you and

Adrian Prince. The man's as crazy as his brother was, especially when it comes to vengeance. But I know you're all hiding something from me."

"Someone's coming." Lucian spoke just before a thump came on the front door. The three men moved in the blink of an eye, placing themselves in front of the women. Blythe found herself thrust behind Cassidy, staring at his back. The gun was back in his hand.

"Man and woman." Stefan began to stroll out of the room. He paused long enough to call over his shoulder. "Well, well, well." He sounded more amused than worried. "I believe Zane York has finally come calling."

Zane stood on the front step of Lucian Dalakis' house and waited for someone to answer the door. They were home. He could feel it in his bones. He'd been here many times before, watching from the outside. This was the first time he'd get to see the inside, assuming they let him over the threshold.

Sophia stood beside him, slightly nervous but hiding it well. No wonder. She knew what he was and she knew what the Dalakis families were. Not many people would walk willingly into the home of vampires. Once again, he was reminded of just how special Sophia was. If he'd had his way, she'd be tucked away safe in his apartment. He didn't think her place was safe any longer. But she was having none of it. If he didn't take her with him, she'd have just followed him. She'd informed him as much when he'd tried to talk her out of coming.

It had taken them longer to get here than he'd anticipated. Sophia had spent an hour in her office after she'd finished talking to the police. She'd insisted on finishing the magazine article she'd been working on and emailing it to the editor.

When he'd suggested that they leave, she'd given him a withering look and informed him that, since she wasn't independently wealthy, if she wanted to eat she had to work. He'd thought about telling her that he was independently wealthy, but thought better of it. She was mad enough at the fact she'd slept an entire day away and missed her work commitments. He didn't want to feed the flames of her anger. Besides, he respected her sense of responsibility and commitment to her work. He felt the same way about his work on the police force.

Then she'd phoned the newspapers that had been expecting articles from her. She apologized to the editors for missing her deadline. He'd tried not to feel too guilty about that. She handled it all smoothly and easily without really telling them anything at all. He'd been more than impressed with her skill.

Then she'd written an article, which she'd sent to several newspapers. Since they included the latest news with the phone call and Sophia's impression that the caller was the killer, the editors were more than appeased.

Once that was done, she'd insisted on grabbing another quick shower before pulling on clean clothes. He supposed she was feeling a bit sticky and sweaty after the earlier sexual interlude on her desk.

They'd both been quiet on the trip over here. Both of them were thinking about the caller's threat. Was another woman being stalked, being targeted for death even as they drove over here? Zane hoped not, but he knew better. Another woman would die tonight and there wasn't anything they could do to stop it.

Then there was his and Sophia's relationship. There was so much unsaid between them, but this was not the time to talk about it. But soon. As soon as this mess was over, he promised himself. They'd both take some time to explore the deep bond between them.

The door was yanked opened and Stefan Dalakis filled the doorway. He glanced at Sophia with interest. "Dalakis," Zane growled, fighting the urge to rip the other man's throat out just for looking at his woman.

Stefan ignored Zane as he held out his hand to Sophia. "And who do we have here?"

"Sophia Daring—I'm a freelance reporter."

Stefan's eyebrows raised in amusement. "A member of the press. How interesting." He turned the full force of his green-eyed glare on Zane. "Zane York. To what do we owe the honor?" The tone of his voice made it clear that he thought this was anything but an honor.

"We need to talk."

The other man shook his head. "We're rather busy at the moment." He smiled charmingly at Sophia. "You'll have to come back another day."

Zane almost turned and walked away. To hell with the Dalakis family. If they ended up in trouble over this, it wasn't his fault. He'd had nothing but trouble in his life since he first sought to learn about this family. At this moment, he wished he'd never heard of them.

He felt Sophia's hand on the small of his back, offering comfort and support, giving him strength. It was a light touch, but it meant so much to him. It made him feel as if he were no longer alone in the world. Sophia was precious to him in a way he wasn't certain she could ever truly understand.

Zane knew he couldn't walk away. Not now. Not when he knew that someone was trying to frame the family for murder. If it were just the men, he might take his chances and wait. But there were women to consider and they had to be protected at all costs.

Stefan started to close the door, but Zane stuck the toe of his boot inward, blocking it from closing. Stefan's eyes narrowed menacingly and the muscles in his body tightened and rolled.

Zane felt his own body responding, his muscles tensing, preparing for battle. He was poised to strike if necessary. He had a woman of his own to protect now. "You want to tell me why someone has murdered a woman, drained her blood and left your family's name at the crime scene?"

He tried to hide it, but Zane sensed the other man's genuine shock. Stefan studied them for a long moment, his green eyes assessing them both, and then slowly opened the door. "You'd better come in."

Chapter Thirteen

Zane kept one arm locked protectively around Sophia as they both followed Stefan down the hallway. With his preternatural senses, he knew that there was a group of people gathered in the room just ahead of them. He could also sense Sophia's growing unease. Leaning down, he whispered in her ear. "Don't worry. They won't hurt you."

He knew that Stefan could hear him and it was as much as warning to the other man as it was a promise to Sophia. Stefan glanced over his shoulder, but Zane gave no indication that he thought Stefan might have overheard them. Zane wasn't going to give away anything. Not yet.

Keeping Sophia close, his gaze swept the room, taking in the occupants. He knew all but one. As expected, Lucian and both the Dalakis wives were there as well. There was a blonde-haired woman seated in a high-backed chair. Zane's eyes narrowed. If he wasn't mistaken, she was bruised and slightly battered. Sam Cassidy stood beside the woman, his arm draped across the back of the chair. There was no mistaking the protective posture. Interesting.

Lucian had shifted his position as soon as he and Sophia had walked into the room, sliding in front of the sofa where his wife and sister-in-law were sitting. Zane nodded his approval. Good. They should be protective of their women. Anything less was unacceptable.

Lucian's eyes widened ever-so slightly in surprise, but then they became shuttered again as he glanced over at his brother.

"This is Sophia Daring. A reporter," Stefan informed them as he strolled over to stand beside his family. "And we all know Zane York."

The women nodded, but didn't speak. Obviously, they all knew he'd been asking questions about them for several years now and didn't trust him. He'd known this wasn't going to be easy, but he was determined.

Sophia straightened and squared her shoulders. "I'm pleased to meet you all, but I wish it could be under other circumstances." Before he could stop her, she launched into a full report of the night in the cemetery and the call she'd received earlier tonight. She spared no details, giving the graphic facts of the woman's death and of the note she'd found with the body. Sophia also gave her opinion of the caller and what he was trying to accomplish. He noted that she left out any mention of their relationship, but the other three men in the room were staring at him with speculation in their eyes.

Both women seemed shocked by the news, Laurel Rose even more so than Delight. Stefan's large hand wrapped around the back of his wife's neck, kneading it, offering silent comfort. Zane noted that Laurel Rose shifted closer to her husband as she rubbed her hands up and down her arms.

The blonde next to Cassidy gasped and covered her mouth with her hand. Her eyes flew to Stefan and Lucian and then back to Cassidy. Now that was telling. Seems she wasn't sure of the Dalakis brothers either.

"Why are you telling us this? Why didn't you go to the police?" Lucian stepped forward, pure menace emanating from him.

Zane stepped in front of Sophia. "Back off, Dalakis. If she'd just handed the note over to the police, you and your family would be front-page news by now." He kept his body loose, prepared to fight. He still didn't quite trust these men. Stefan left his wife's side and started to saunter closer while Cassidy left his position by the blonde and shifted in front of her.

The tension in the room was palpable. A rumbling, much like a growl, came from deep in Zane's chest. Lucian's eyes narrowed and Stefan moved still closer. Cassidy's fingers tightened around the gun he still clenched in this hand.

"This is ridiculous." Sophia stepped around Zane, her hands on her hips.

"I agree." Delight stepped forward, shoved past her husband and held her hand out to Sophia. "I'm Delight Dalakis, Lucian's wife, and this is Laurel Rose, Stefan's much better half." While Zane watched, Laurel Rose eluded her massive husband as he reached for her and clasped Sophia's hand.

"This is Sam Cassidy," Delight continued with the introductions. "And Blythe Nixon, who we just met earlier this evening."

The name triggered something in Zane's head. He knew that name. He sifted through his memory banks as he studied her and he suddenly remembered where he'd heard her name before. The Club. She used to work at Jethro Prince's club. Now, this was getting more intriguing by the second. What the hell was she doing here?

"Why don't we all sit down?" Delight was already leading Sophia to the sofa. Damn it, he'd told her to stay next to him. Frustrated, he stalked after her, only to meet a solid wall of resistance as Lucian and Stefan stepped in front of him. Standing shoulder to shoulder, they blocked his view of Sophia.

His eyes flashed and he growled, exposing his fangs to them. Both men were momentarily shocked and then they flashed their sharp teeth as well, their eyes changing from green to red in a split second.

"That's enough." This time it was Laurel Rose who spoke. "We have bigger problems at the moment than who's the toughest vampire in the room." She whispered the last as she laid her hand gently over her husband's massive biceps. Zane hadn't realized that she hadn't joined the other women on the sofa. All his focus had been on getting to Sophia.

He bowed his head slightly to her. "My apologies."

His words were drowned out by a gasp. "What are you people?" The blonde woman had moved when no one had been watching her. She was just beyond them, swaying where she stood, her eyes wide, her face alarmingly pale as she stared at all of them.

"Blythe." Sam Cassidy started toward her, but she jerked back and hit the wall. Her arms were extended straight out as if she could ward them off somehow.

"Just let me go. You know everything that I know."

Zane's tension ratcheted up a notch. Had they kidnapped this woman?

"You know I can't just let you go, Blythe. Adrian Prince will just send more men to find you. He knows that you know something, maybe even that you were the one to warn the Dalakis family. He won't stop until he gets you." Cassidy inched closer to Blythe.

Zane relaxed slightly. Okay, so they were protecting the woman. But now they had another problem. Obviously, she wasn't aware of what they were. Or at least she hadn't been until they'd all flashed their fangs.

"Why don't you just erase her memories?" Zane couldn't see why they didn't just do what needed to be done. Ms. Nixon would be none the wiser and their secret would still be safe.

"No." Cassidy glared at him. "No one is going to do anything to Blythe." He shot a look at Lucian and Stefan, who both nodded, and then he turned his attention back to the trembling woman. "Come on, Blythe. You're tired, honey. You just need some rest."

She shook her head, her mouth quivering. "I know what I saw."

Cassidy shifted closer, holding his hand out to her. "Doesn't matter what you saw or didn't see." He stood near enough to touch her now, but he didn't. "I won't let anyone or anything hurt you." His fingers grazed her cheek.

Blythe shook her head and stared at him beseechingly. There was so much pain on her face that Zane felt sorrow for her. Whatever she'd been through tonight, it had been traumatic.

"I promise," Cassidy whispered. Blythe nodded and Zane could see the fatigue in her face. She sighed and closed her eyes. Cassidy wasted no time in scooping her up into his arms and carrying her toward the door. "I'll be back just before dawn," the other man tossed over his shoulder before he disappeared down the hallway, carrying the exhausted woman in his arms.

Sophia cleared her throat. "I'm not sure what's going on with that poor woman, but we do have an immediate problem. A woman is going to be murdered tonight and the murderer is going to try to implicate one or all of you."

It was time to get back on track. "She's right." Zane strode forward. This time the men let him pass. He could feel their tension. It matched his own, but he'd come here to do a job and he'd damn well do it. Then he'd take Sophia home and take her to bed. "Why would someone do such a thing and try to implicate you?"

"I don't know." Lucian dragged his fingers through his hair, his agitation plain.

"What's the deal with Adrian Prince? Does it have anything to do with his brother's death?" Zane didn't let on how much he knew about the situation, but waited to see how much Lucian would tell him.

Lucian hesitated briefly and then told them both in succinct terms everything that had happened between Jethro Prince and the Dalakis family. "But I can't see Adrian Prince as the man behind that murder. He's a murderer for sure, but he'd be much more direct. He's already sent men to try to kill us—why try to implicate us in a murder?"

Zane could see Lucian's point. "It must be some other person. How many enemies do you have?"

"Obviously, one we know nothing about." Stefan cocked his head to one side, watching them all as he thought.

"There's one thing I don't understand." It was Lucian who spoke as he sat on the arm of the sofa next to his wife.

"What's that?" Zane positioned himself at the other end of the sofa near Sophia, but he didn't sit.

"Why are you involved in all this? What's your connection? For that matter, why have you been asking questions about this family?"

Zane shrugged. "Something drew me to the cemetery." Rather, *someone*. He knew now that Sophia was the reason he'd instinctually been led there that night, but he wasn't about to tell them that.

Lucian stared hard, not satisfied with Zane's answer. "You're obviously fully aware of what we are, being a vampire yourself. Who are you and where do you come from?"

Zane glanced down at Sophia. Even she didn't know the full truth of it. No one did. For over one hundred and eighty-five years, he had been the only one who knew the truth of his family, of his heritage. She smiled softly, encouragingly. He wanted to scoop her into his arms and run. He envied Sam Cassidy at the moment. At least he was alone with his woman, and there was no doubt in Zane's mind that she belonged to Cassidy. He'd been too protective for it to be otherwise.

The Dalakis family was all waiting. The women were relaxed, but the men were still on edge. They didn't quite trust him and he didn't blame them for that.

"It's a long story," he began.

"We've got time," Stefan drawled. He was leaning against the wooden mantle, but Zane knew that his relaxed pose was just that—a pose. The man was ready to attack without warning, if he deemed it necessary.

"My parents came to America in the year eighteen hundred and six. I was about six and I remember when we landed in New York." They'd come across on a passenger liner, keeping to their rooms all day long and only venturing out at night. His father had used his mother's illness as an excuse when anyone had inquired. Zane had rather enjoyed the journey across the sea. He'd been so young and it had all been one grand adventure. The night that the harbor of New York had come into view was one he would always remember. All the people, the different languages being spoken on the docks, the smells, the sights, all of it had enthralled him.

"My father told me then that we were taking our last name from our new city. Thus my name became Zane York." He shifted uncomfortably, not wanting to relive the painful memories of the past but knowing he really had no choice. Not anymore.

"I don't remember much about my life before then. We were always moving." Running was more like it, but he'd never known what, or who, his parents were running from. "My mother," he paused, searching for the right words. "My mother was not well."

Fingers, soft yet strong, curled around his. He glanced down at where Sophia's hand was wound around his. That one simple touch gave him the strength to continue. He wanted so badly just to take her away from here and sink his cock into her soft body, losing himself in her heat and her goodness.

"My father said it would be better here." Zane shook his head. "He was wrong. Deluding himself. If anything, my mother got worse."

"I'm sorry." The unexpected sympathy from Stefan moved Zane. He could feel the other man's genuine empathy.

Zane nodded, swallowing back the emotion that threatened to overwhelm him. "She had to be kept locked up for her own safety." He removed his hand from Sophia's and steeled himself for what he had to say next. The story wasn't pretty to begin with and only got worse.

"By the time I was eighteen, I realized that my father had also lost his grip on reality. He'd tried to save my mother from madness, but instead descended into it with her." This had been the darkest hour of his life. He'd been so young, so alone.

He felt raw, exposing his weaknesses to everyone. But they were all waiting and the rest of the tale had to be told. "I followed my father and watched him. At first I couldn't believe my eyes. My father, who'd always been so kind and so good, was..." Zane broke off as tears pricked his eyes. He sucked in a deep breath, ignoring Sophia's attempts to touch him, purposely stepping away from her. He ignored the blast of hurt that he felt from her. He didn't want to hurt her. It just seemed as if the men in his family were destined to hurt the people they loved.

"He was killing people."

"Oh no."

He ignored Sophia's whispered words, ignored the gasps of horror from the other women and continued. He had to get this done.

"Not just once. I discovered that he'd been doing it for months. Months!" His remembered shame washed over him and his stomach churned, burning with the memories. Dozens, maybe hundreds of people had died because he'd been unaware of what was happening with his father. "I'd been so wrapped up in my own life, the changes that occur when we reach manhood, that I'd missed the signs."

"It's not your fault." Lucian spoke calmly and firmly. "He was your father. He should have been taking care of you. You would not have suspected him of such horrors."

Zane would not relinquish his part in this tragedy. "I should have seen it sooner." He began to pace the room, needing to do something to keep the worst of the memories from consuming him. "I did what I had to do." His actions had haunted him for almost two hundred years. He turned to face the rest of them squarely. "I did what I had to do," he repeated.

"What did you do?" Sophia's face was pale as snow, her few freckles even more prominent against the white of her skin. The thought that he might never touch her soft flesh again, never feel her beneath his hands and his mouth almost brought him to his knees. She was already a part of him and he needed her more than he needed his next breath.

"I followed him one night and before he could drain his victim of blood, I..." Zane swallowed hard and blinked away the salty tears stinging his eyes. The dark, garbage-filled alleyway was as vivid in his memory as it was that night. The night air had been cool and his boots had made no sound as he'd stepped over the refuse. The stench had filled his nostrils, permeating his flesh. Even after all these years, some nights he swore he could still smell the odor on his skin.

"I drove a stake through his heart. He didn't die. Not right away." Blood had spurted everywhere, covering his father's chest, covering Zane's hands. "He turned and faced me, staggering toward me. For a minute, he seemed like his old self and he smiled at me, told me he was proud of me and then told me to finish the job."

He ignored Sophia's stifled sobs, rushing to finish the story. "As I drew the ancient sword that I'd brought with me, he told me to find the rest of my family. Told me to read his journal. Then I killed him."

Those four simple words said so much, yet so little. He'd been forced to slay his own father, and in doing so, he'd sentenced his own mother to death. Zane could still feel the whoosh of the blade as it split the night air, the feel of flesh and bone being severed like a hot knife through butter. His father's body had hovered in the air before simply crumpling. The head had rolled to Zane's feet, the sightless eyes staring up at him.

"I burned the body and then returned to our home."

"Your mother was dead as well." The sympathy in Laurel Rose's voice almost shattered his tenuous composure.

He sucked in a painful breath. "As you know, your life is connected to that of your spouse. When one dies, so does the other."

"Oh my God," Sophia whispered under her breath, but Zane could hear it as if she'd yelled it. Surely she'd scorn him now. A man—no, a creature—who'd killed his own father and mother.

"I gathered my belongings and burned our house to the ground." The flames had shot up into the sky, lighting it for miles around. He didn't tell them that he'd trashed the place first, destroying the crystal chandeliers, the fancy dishes and silk dresses his father had bought to try to make Zane's mother smile. He'd taken the ancient, jewel-

encrusted family sword, the one he'd used to kill his sire, and slashed the furniture and the drapes, trying to dispel the fury that had filled him. He hadn't even been sure he was going to burn the house itself until he'd knocked over a candlestick and it had set his own bed ablaze. It had seemed fitting somehow to let it all burn.

Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.

"Did you ever find your family?" Delight was curled up close to her husband, his arm tight around her.

"Yes." He'd known who his family was for years. "It was all there in my father's journal, just as he'd promised."

"Who are they?" Stefan was staring hard at him now.

The resemblance was there, but one important piece of the puzzle was missing. Zane reached up and plucked the color contact lenses out. The hard emerald-green eyes that stared back at him from both men were very familiar. They'd been his father's eyes. And they were the same eyes that stared back at him from the mirror every morning of his entire life.

"I was born Zane Dalakis. My father and your father were brothers. I am your cousin."

Chapter Fourteen

Sophia tried to concentrate on finishing another article, but it was almost impossible. The words blurred in front of her eyes and her focus was shot. She pushed away from her computer and leaned back in her chair. She was so tired, but she knew she wouldn't sleep. Heaven only knows she'd already tried. But all she'd done was toss and turn in her bed while her mind tried to make some sense out of everything that had happened.

After dropping his bombshell, Zane had barely given the Dalakis family time to acknowledge him before he was insisting that the men needed to go out into the city and try to stop another murder from taking place. He'd ignored her attempts to try to talk to him alone and she'd finally given up, knowing that their need to stop the crazed murderer who was running around was more important than her personal life.

In the end, Zane and Stefan had gone out to scour the city, especially the cemeteries. Lucian had remained at home to protect the women. Just before dawn, Stefan had returned. Alone. Sophia had tried to hide the pain that Zane's rejection had caused, but she knew from the sympathetic glances the others had given her that she hadn't been successful.

They'd found another body sometime around four in the morning. Just like Janice Barton, this woman had both wrists slit and her neck cut. All her blood had been drained from her body. Once again, a piece of paper had been placed by the victim with the Dalakis name on it. Stefan had confiscated it and placed an anonymous call to the police. Then both men had hidden in the shadows, watching and listening until they'd had to leave with the coming of the dawn.

Cassidy had shown up just as the Dalakis family was retiring for the day. He'd informed them that Blythe was still asleep in his apartment. Once he'd been brought up to speed on the situation, she'd decided to leave even though Cassidy had tried to talk her out of it.

Sophia had felt very alone as the former cop had spirited her out a back gate and taken her several streets over where he'd put her in a cab to send her home. She had the cell phone numbers of the Dalakis family and Cassidy, but she still had no idea how to reach Zane.

Sophia pushed out of her chair and wandered over to her bulletin board, her gaze locked on the information and pictures she'd placed there. Her heart ached for the latest victim and her family. They were innocent pawns in a battle they knew nothing about. Sophia didn't know the woman's name yet, but she'd spent part of her day at the police station getting the facts and writing more articles. She wanted to do her part and had

encouraged the public to come forward if anyone had seen anything. It was a long shot, but it was something.

She cursed as she whirled away from the board. She'd kept busy all day, trying not to think about Zane and if she'd ever see him again. After last night, she couldn't be sure. She'd thought they'd shared something special, but then again, her track record with men was abysmal. Maybe all his talk about them having a connection was just that—talk.

She rubbed her breastbone, trying to ignore the ache in her heart. Every word he'd spoken last night was burned into her memory. His pain had cut through her even as his increasing distance had added to it.

The sun had gone down over two hours ago and she still hadn't heard anything from Zane. Not that she expected to.

Oh heck, who did she think she was fooling? Closing her tired eyes, she scrubbed her hands over them. She blinked, but they still felt gritty. Sophia could use about twelve hours of uninterrupted sleep, but that wasn't likely to happen anytime soon. Her mind was way too active and she was unable to shut off her thoughts long enough to allow sleep to take hold.

Besides that, she freely admitted she was nervous about being alone. She, who prided herself on her ability to survive on her own, was afraid to close her eyes. The phone calls had unnerved her. She was certain they were from the murderer and that had her startling at every single sound. The police had wanted her to leave town for a while, but she'd refused. This was her home and, besides which, she had a job to do. It had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that Zane was here.

Coffee. That was what she needed. She was so wired from all the caffeine she'd already consumed today that another jolt wouldn't hurt her. Her mind wandered as she made her way into the kitchen. She hadn't eaten hardly anything today and, while she still had no appetite, she knew she had to eat, if only to keep her strength up. Except her cupboards hadn't changed any in the past few days and they still didn't contain anything remotely edible.

Sighing, she turned on her heel and headed for the front door. She'd take herself out to eat. Right now, she wouldn't mind being in a crowded café, surrounded by other people. She paused and chewed on her bottom lip. But she'd have to come home alone after that and that didn't appeal to her at all.

She wanted to scream in frustration. This was so unlike her. She was usually so decisive and in control. "Get a grip on yourself," she muttered. "Zane isn't coming, so you might as well get over it and move on. You're on your own just like you've always been."

And that's what hurt the most. She'd almost started to believe that Zane might be the real deal. Maybe he'd be a man she could count on. A man who would stay.

Boy, had she been mistaken. He'd taken off as soon as things got tough.

A hard knock sounded on her front door and she jumped, glaring at the portal. Her heart was pounding so hard she could feel it knocking against her ribs. Sucking in a deep breath, she slowly released it, striving for calm. Ignoring the fact that her legs were trembling and her hands were unsteady, she went to the door and looked out through the peephole.

She leaned her head against the door and sighed. She wasn't ready for this. Not now.

"I know you're in there." She could hear Zane's voice easily even though a door separated them. "Open up, Sophia."

"I'm busy." It might be cowardly, but she just couldn't deal with him right now. Her emotions were too close to the surface. She had no idea what she might say or do.

"I won't stay." Well, his intentions were certainly clear enough. Straightening her shoulders, she made sure her T-shirt was tucked into her jeans and ran a hand through her hair before she turned the locks on the door. She wasn't primping, she assured herself. She just wanted to present a cool, composed image.

Yanking the door open, she knew she was lost. He looked worse than she did. His green eyes were bloodshot and his face appeared pale. He was clad in a black T-shirt that was pulled tight across his shoulders. The fabric was taut around his biceps, emphasizing their size. She knew that the shirt hid a rock-hard set of abs and an impressive chest. Her fingers itched to touch him, to soothe him. His jeans were dark as well, and molded to his muscular thighs, drawing her eyes all the way down to his scuffed boots and then back up again. When she realized she was staring, she shook herself and forced herself to look back at his face.

He made no attempt to step inside her apartment, but waited.

She stared at him, held spellbound by his eyes. She'd known that the muddy brown eyes hadn't suited him, but the brilliant green did. Sorcerer's eyes. Beneath the power and the hard façade, she could sense the uncertainty and it tugged at her heartstrings. Stepping away from the door, she held it open.

Tension seemed to drain from Zane's large body as he stepped inside, taking the time to close and lock the door behind him before he turned to her. "I wasn't sure you would let me in." His gaze rolled over her, examining her from head to foot, lingering on her breasts.

Sophia resisted the urge to cross her arms over her chest. She hadn't worn a bra and now wished that she had. Zane had a way of making her feel totally undressed even when she was decently covered. "You're the one who never came back last night. Not me." She could have bitten her tongue the minute she'd uttered the words. Damn, she hadn't meant to let him know that his actions had hurt her. Calm and cool. She repeated the phrase like a mantra.

His dark brows came together, wrinkling his forehead. "I didn't think you'd want to see me."

She shrugged and turned away. "Doesn't matter." She almost choked on those two words. The pain in the region of her heart said otherwise. "Look." She rubbed her tired eyes, still not looking at him. "I know you've got things to do. I don't expect you to hang around now that you've gotten what you came for."

A heavy hand clamped down on her shoulder, spinning her around. He didn't look tired any longer. No, Zane's lips were pursed tight into a frown and his eyes were glittering with barely suppressed anger. It amazed her how well she could read him. "What do you think I came for?"

"Information." Sophia tried to shrug off his hand, but his fingers tightened slightly, not hurting her, but not letting her escape from him either. She ignored the butterflies in her stomach and the sexual tension building within her. It was chemistry, nothing more. "You know everything that I know."

His expression became shuttered. She felt shut off from him even more. She had to get him out of here before she fell totally apart and begged him not to leave. Straightening her spine, she ignored the dampness coating her panties, resisted the urge to rub her body against his. She could feel the heat pouring off his large frame, could smell his unique scent, a combination of musk, sandalwood and pure male essence that made her mouth water. Her nipples were standing at attention. There was no way he couldn't see them pressing against her shirt. That couldn't be helped, but she'd be damned if she'd acknowledge it.

"If you have an email account, I can just send you any information I get. There's no need for you to come back here again."

"No need." His voice was little more than a guttural growl.

She swallowed hard, fighting back the swell of tears with pure force of will. "Look, you made it more than obvious last night that you don't care to see me anymore. That's fine by me."

This time she did pull away from him. She stared out the small window in her living room, watching the dark street below, trying to distance herself from the pain welling inside her.

"Not want to see you." She could hear the surprise in his voice, but she wasn't buying it. He'd made his position very clear last night when he'd refused to look at her, talk to her and then finally abandoned her in the home of virtual strangers. "Not want to see you!" he roared.

She found herself plucked off her feet and pushed back against the wall. The first stirrings of fear began deep within her. She really didn't know Zane at all and he was so much stronger than her. He'd picked her up as if she weighed nothing at all. She could feel the fury in him as he bent his head toward her until their noses were practically touching.

"I didn't think you'd want to even look at me after last night." His voice was little more than a strained whisper.

Like she was buying that. "Sure. Whatever." She willed her voice to be strong and sure. What came out was more of a pain-filled whisper. She lowered her eyes, ashamed at her continued reaction to him. What was wrong with her? Didn't she have any pride, any sense of self-preservation? Obviously not, because she still wanted him. Her body pulsed with need and she curled her hands into fists, digging her short nails into her palms to keep from reaching out to touch him.

"Look at me," he growled.

She shook her head.

His sigh rumbled the hair on the top of her head and he cupped her face in his hands, tilting it upward. "I am a vampire."

"I know that." They'd been through this already. Yes, she was still coming to grips with the whole vampire, sucking blood, immortality thing, but she'd been mostly okay with it.

"My mother could not accept the conversion. It drove her insane over the years and then it slowly did the same to my father."

Her heart ached for him and she felt herself softening toward him. Her hands uncurled and shifted to rest lightly on his waist. The tension seeped out of her spine and she leaned against him, offering him silent comfort. "I'm sorry." She didn't know what else to say.

"You're sorry," he repeated. "I'm sorry too, but it changes nothing. They still both went mad and I..." He swallowed hard and his words were bleak. "I killed them both."

Cursing herself for her weakness, she wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him tight. There was no way she couldn't offer him comfort. His pain beat at her until she couldn't bear it any longer. She squeezed him tight until their bodies were melded together from chest to thigh. "I'm so sorry it all happened. So sorry you had to go through all that alone." If she understood anything, it was loneliness. Her drug-addicted mother had been right beside her for years, but she might have well been dead for all the attention she'd paid to her daughter.

Zane pushed her away until they were no longer touching. He stared down at her, his green eyes glittering with emotion. "Don't you understand? I murdered my parents."

She shook her head. "No. You did what you had to do to protect the innocent. In the end, even your father knew that what you were doing was right."

"How can you even want to be with me?" The desolation in his voice touched her very soul and then she knew.

"That's why you wouldn't look at me last night, why you wouldn't talk to me?" He tried to pull away, but this time it was her that hung on. Her fingers curled into the front of his shirt, holding on tight. She was no match for him physically and knew that he was only still here because he wanted to be. "You were afraid."

His head jerked up and his mouth opened. She thought he would deny it. Instead, he closed his mouth again and lowered his head. "Don't you see, Sophia? I want you in my life. Always and forever. You are my heart and my soul." His fingers sifted through her hair and down the back of her skull, stopping at the base of her neck. "I want to be with you. I want to change you. I want you to be as I am."

Sophia swallowed hard, fear beating at her even as the lure of his words tempted her. "You want me to become a vampire?" No sunshine. Bloodsucking. Endless night. She wasn't sure she was ready for that. On the other hand, she'd be immortal and be with Zane. There was something to be said for that.

"It's selfish, but I do," he whispered. "Now you know why I can't see you again."

"What?" She'd lost track of this conversation somewhere along the line. Was Zane just playing mind games with her? She was totally confused. One moment he was saying things like she was his heart and wanted to be with her always, the next he was saying he couldn't see her.

His choice of words sunk into her brain. He hadn't said that he didn't *want* to see her again. Only that he *couldn't*. "Why can't you see me?" she asked gently.

"It's not safe for you."

The light bulb went off. This wasn't about them. It was about Zane's parents. "I'm not your mother, Zane." He flinched and dropped his hands from her neck. She reached up and twined her arms around his neck. "And you're not your father."

"I don't want to hurt you." He buried his face in the curve of her neck.

She tried to ignore the press of his firm lips against her skin. "You hurt me last night by leaving me, by not talking to me."

"I'm sorry, Sophia. The last thing I want to do is to harm you." His words were so heartfelt and she could feel the sincerity in them as he wrapped his arms around her waist and clung to her.

"Why don't we take things one day at a time? We don't have to make any decisions about our relationship today or tomorrow, do we?"

Zane raised his head. "No." His hands drifted around to her waist. "We don't have to decide anything today. If you're sure you still want to see me, that's enough for now."

Sophia had a feeling that Zane had never made himself this vulnerable to another soul in his life. The fact that he had such deep feelings for her made it easier for her to admit hers for him. She wasn't in this alone. They were in it together.

"I want to be with you." She pulled his head down until their lips were barely touching. "For as long as it lasts."

Then she kissed him.

Chapter Fifteen

Zane could taste the desperation on Sophia's lips as they grazed his, but he didn't care. They were together now and that was all that mattered. Just the fact that she still wanted him, didn't think him some kind of monster, was a gift from the heavens. After everything he'd revealed last evening, he'd been sure she wouldn't want anything else to do with him. In order to avoid the pain her scorn would bring, he'd shunned her first. But he hadn't been able to stay away from her.

Stefan had asked about their relationship last night while the two of them had been scouring the city, but Zane had denied any personal involvement. The other man had scoffed at him, telling Zane that he wasn't fooling anyone but himself. He could have told Stefan he wasn't doing a very good job at even that.

Sophia was the last thing he'd thought about when the heavy day sleep of his kind had come upon him at dawn and she was the first thing he'd thought about when he'd awoken at dusk. For the first time in his existence, his sleep had been restless, filled with images of Sophia. She was a yearning in his blood and bones, indeed in his very soul, which he couldn't deny.

Her lips were soft under his, parting, inviting him to taste, to take. He plunged his tongue deep, wanting to reclaim every part of her body, to cherish it, to make it his. Her tongue dueled with his as whimpers of need came from deep within her. He slanted his head to one side, wanting to get closer to her. His fingers sifted through her short red hair, tugging her to him. The fire of her desire warmed him, thawing the ice that had encased him since the night before. Sophia was nothing short of a miracle to him.

He tore his lips from hers and peppered her face with kisses. He adored her freckles and made sure he didn't miss any of them. Sophia was panting now, hot puffs of breath brushing against his neck. His cock was throbbing, demanding he strip her naked and take her now. His blood cried out for hers. He was a man starving and she was a feast.

He'd tried to do the right thing. Tried to let her go.

But she'd made her choice. Now there was no going back—for either of them.

Zane slid his hands down her shoulders and her back as he continued to plunder her mouth with abandon. Her hot tongue enthusiastically twined with his as she kissed him back. He wanted that talented mouth wrapped around his shaft as he plunged in and out. He closed his eyes and tried to think about anything but the beautiful woman wrapped in his arms. He was so damn close to coming. His balls were tight against his body and his cock felt as if it was going to explode.

Grabbing the backs of her thighs, he lifted her. She immediately wrapped her legs around his waist, hooking her ankles together at the small of his back. He could feel her

heat through the layers of their clothing as it pressed against his stomach. The scent of her arousal was an aphrodisiac driving him closer to the edge.

She still wanted him. Even after everything he'd said, everything she knew him to be. She still wanted him.

Pulling away from her luscious lips, he left a trail of wet, openmouthed kisses down her jaw and along the tantalizing curve of her neck. He tasted the salt from her skin, drank in the sweet cries that fell from her lips. Her legs tightened around him as he stumbled down the hallway.

He had to get to her bedroom. This time he wanted to spend hours locked in her arms, fucking her over and over until both of them collapsed facedown onto the sheets from exhaustion. His teeth tingled, his fangs lengthening. He wanted to taste her too. To feel the blast of heat and energy that her blood gave him. She was so sweet, her blood thick and potent and his.

Zane managed to get them in through the bedroom door, kicking it shut behind him. Sophia's hands were everywhere. On his shoulders, his back, his chest. His skin felt as if it was stretched too tight over his bones. He needed to feel her hands on his naked flesh.

Staggering to the bed, he tried to place her on the mattress, but she wouldn't let go of him. Turning, he lowered himself carefully to the bed. The motion pressed her groin against his and he groaned.

"You have to let go of me."

"No." She nipped at his neck, her hands slipping beneath his shirt.

In spite of the need pounding through his body, he laughed. She raised her head and stared at him. Her lips were soft and slightly swollen, her red hair tousled and her pale green eyes were passion-filled. His proud fairy queen was now a seductress.

"I want you naked." He cupped her ass in his hands and squeezed.

"Why didn't you say so?" She scrambled from his lap, standing right in front of him and began to tug off her clothing with wild abandon.

No sexy striptease could have aroused him as effectively as Sophia tearing at her clothing. Her shirt came off first and she tossed it aside. She toed off her sneakers as she reached for the snap at the front of her jeans. His own clothing felt restraining, so Zane ripped his shirt over his head and threw it to the floor. Sophia stopped, her hands on her zipper and just stared at him.

"Don't stop." If she stopped now, he'd go mad.

"Right." She yanked her zipper down and then shimmied out of her jeans, taking her underwear with it as she pushed them over her thighs and calves. Bending down, she shoved her socks off as well and then she was naked.

Her skin was milky white and, he knew from experience, very soft. He could spend hours just running his fingers over her supple flesh. There were several intriguing freckles on the curve of her small breasts that he just had to taste. He knew she was self-

conscious about her breasts, but to him they were perfect. They weren't even a handful, but they were incredibly responsive. Her nipples were a light, dusky rose. Puckered proud, they stood at attention. He licked his lips and she moaned.

Her rib cage was narrow and her waist small, but her hips flared out slightly. The nest of curls at the apex of her thighs was just a shade darker than the hair on her head. Reaching out his hand, he sifted through the dark red curls, loving the way they wrapped around his fingers.

He could see the rapid rise and fall of her chest, see the fluttering of her pulse in her neck as he pushed his fingers between her thighs. She parted her legs, allowing him entry. He closed his eyes and sucked in a deep, calming breath. Reaching out, he took hold of her hand and guided it between her thighs. He felt her slight resistance and then she relaxed, allowing him to do as he would. He glided her fingers over her slick folds. Could feel the moisture coating his hand. She was already soaking wet for him. Withdrawing her fingers, he brought them to his mouth and licked them.

She whimpered as he sucked one finger farther into his mouth, drawing her essence from it. Her hips undulated slightly as he slowly pulled his head back, scraping his teeth over her fingers "You taste perfect. Like peaches and honey."

"Zane!" she cried, her head falling back as she swayed toward him.

Pulling her closer, he closed his mouth over one of her pert nipples, drawing it deep. She gripped his head, tugging his hair as she held him to her. He loved the slight sting of her nails digging into his scalp. His hands molded the firm, pliant flesh of her ass.

Sophia's hands slid down his neck. She placed her palms on his shoulders and pushed. He reluctantly released her, swirling his tongue around her areola before he sat back.

"It's my turn." Her husky voice had his balls pulling up tight against his body.

"What do you want?"

"You." Dropping to her knees in front of him, she reached for the zipper of his jeans.

Zane held his breath as she slowly and ever-so carefully drew the tab downward, parting the metal teeth. He bit back a groan as her fingers shoved aside his underwear, releasing his heavy erection. It strained toward her, the bulbous head dark and wet.

Sophia made a purring sound as she eased forward. She opened her mouth and flicked her tongue over the tip, drawing a bead of pearly fluid into her mouth. "Mmm. Salty."

Zane fisted his hands in the bedcovers on either side of him to keep from grabbing her and fucking her mouth. He wanted to give her time to explore, time to get used to him.

He almost came off the bed when her hand cupped his scrotum, her fingers gently massaging his tight balls. His back bowed and he felt his fingernails elongate and rip through the comforter, all the way to the mattress. "Sophia," he groaned.

She ignored him, intent on what she was doing to him. Her lips nuzzled his heavy sac and then her mouth drew one of his balls inside. Liquid seeped from the tip of his erection. Just when he thought he might come, she released him and ran that clever tongue up the underside of his cock, tracing the long, pulsing blue vein. He swallowed hard, his chest heaving as he tried to suck in enough air to breathe.

"I love the hot feel of you." Her fingers skimmed over his shaft as she licked the head. "Your skin is so soft, but you're so hard."

"Sophia." This time there was no mistaking the warning in his voice. The time for teasing was over.

Her husky laugh washed over him as her warm breath teased his erection. Then she was taking him inside her. Her open mouth closed over his cock. Zane shut his eyes and gritted his teeth to keep from coming. It was too soon. He wanted to savor every moment of this. The glide of her mouth as she took him deeper. The wet heat that surrounded him. The firm but gentle massage of her fingers as she caressed his balls and the lower part of his shaft.

Zane had had many women over the course of the two hundred years of his life, but never had anything felt as good as Sophia's mouth on his body. Her teeth teased his cock as she drew her mouth away from him, swirling her tongue around the head before taking him back inside.

Sweat covered his back and chest as he struggled to maintain control. Every muscle in his body tightened in anticipation. He growled when she removed her mouth, teasing the tip yet again. He couldn't take it any longer.

Gripping her head in his hands, he drew her mouth back to his cock. She parted her lips and took him willingly. "Suck. Hard." He flexed his hips toward her, driving his cock deeper. She squeezed the base of his shaft and then she began to move her hand up and down.

His balls constricted and his cock throbbed. Blood pounded through his veins. The blood vessel in his temple pulsed. He was only seconds away.

Holding her steady, he fucked her mouth. Her tongue stroked his hard length as he plunged in and out, going as deep as he could. She took more of him than he'd thought she could. It was heaven. It was hell. It was driving him to the brink. His fangs lengthened and he knew his eyes were turning red. Could feel the change in them as she pushed him higher.

Her fingers slid from the heavy sac hanging down between his legs and massaged the flesh just behind it. That, combined with the pumping motion of her other hand and the sweet sucking of her mouth, pushed him over the edge.

Zane shouted her name as he came. Hot cum shot into her mouth and down her throat. She swallowed and kept sucking. He thought that the top of his head might

explode as his cock continued to pulse. A shudder racked his body as he felt the last vestiges of his release.

And he'd thought he would be able to walk away from her.

There was no way that would ever happen now. No matter what kind of relationship they ended up with, Zane knew he would never leave her. She was the woman for him. The only woman for him. He knew it. Sensed it on a deep, cellular level. There would never be another woman who would complete him as Sophia did.

She released him and sat back on her heels, smiling up at him. Once again, she looked like a mischievous fairy, so delicate and light compared to him. But he knew that looks were deceiving. She was strong and courageous and...perfect.

Dragging her up into his arms, he captured her mouth, twining his tongue with hers, needing to kiss her, to claim her. He could taste himself on her lips and found himself getting hard again. The smell of sex permeated the air, making it feel thick and heavy. Her skin was warm and damp against his chest and he could feel the heavy thump of her heart as she leaned into him.

His boots were still on and his jeans were barely pushed down his hips. He knew he should undress, but he couldn't let her go. Instead, he lay back on the bed, drawing her down with him. She covered him like a blanket, surrounding him with her heat and her scent.

His fangs ached, his blood pounded, demanding he satisfy the other need beating at him. Blood. He had to have blood. But not just any. Hers.

Zane shook his head to try to clear the bloodlust that was clouding his brain. He wanted to bring her pleasure first. He wasn't sure she'd want him to drink from her and he'd vowed he would never take what she didn't offer.

Sophia ended their kiss and raised her head to stare down at him. Her sex was wet and hot against his stomach. Her skin was flushed, a vivid reminder of the rich blood that pumped through her veins. He had to taste her if not her blood.

"Come and sit on my face, my love. I want to eat your sweet pussy until you scream." His eyes followed her tongue as she licked her lips. He could see the desire in her eyes, the need, the hunger. "Ride my face first and then you can ride my cock."

Sophia sat on Zane's stomach, her hands resting on the hard muscles of his chest. There was no give in him anywhere. The man was solid as a rock. She'd never thought of herself as the type of woman who was turned on by rippling abs and bulging biceps, but there was something about knowing he was so much stronger than she was that was a huge turn-on. He could do whatever he wanted to her and she couldn't stop him. But she knew that all she had to say was no and he would stop. For the first time in her life, she had a taste of feminine power.

She licked her lips, loving the tang of him that lingered there. She'd given one of her former lovers a blowjob from time to time, but she couldn't say she'd actually

enjoyed it. But everything was different with Zane. She'd wanted to take him in her mouth, to taste him, to feel him tremble and shake as he came.

Perhaps it was because he was so incredibly giving when it came to her. He seemed more concerned about her satisfaction than about his own. She wanted to do everything with him. Anything he wanted. Including having him drink from her. She knew that, intellectually, she should be grossed out totally by the mere thought of him drinking her blood. However, after having been through the experience, she knew it was anything but disgusting. It was intimate and erotic and made her feel connected to Zane in a way she'd never felt connected to any other person in her entire life.

His raw demands made her pussy clench tight. There was no right and wrong between them. There was only the two of them, and whatever they wanted to do was right.

Shifting up on her knees, she crawled forward until her legs were on either side of his head. His green eyes seared her body with their heat. She could feel the warmth of his breath against her inner thighs as he clamped his hands over the backs of her legs and positioned her where he wanted her.

"Touch your breasts."

"What?" His words startled her.

His tongue pressed into the crease at the top of her thigh. "Touch yourself, my love." He took her hands in his and placed them over her breasts.

He'd called her that before. My love. The words made her heart soar even as she told herself not to read too much into it. Men often said things in the heat of passion that they didn't mean. Still, it sounded nice and made her feel warm and cared for.

"Pinch your nipples between your thumbs and forefingers," he urged.

Somehow it was easy for her to do it with his encouragement. She'd never done this before. Sure, she'd masturbated with her vibrator, but she always avoided her breasts. Their small size had always made her feel inadequate.

"That's it," he murmured as she did as he asked. Her nipples were tight and the slight pinching sensation felt good. She moaned and undulated her hips. Zane chuckled, and she could feel the vibration against her pussy as he kissed her there. "I'll have to buy you some nipple clamps. You have such sensitive nipples, you'd love the feeling they'd give you. I'll bet you could come just from them attached to your breasts."

She shivered and pinched her nipples tighter.

"Would you like that, Sophia?"

"God, yes." There was no thought of denial. She knew that he could feel her growing desire, her excitement.

"Maybe a clit clamp as well...eventually." He flicked the swollen nub with his tongue, making her flinch. His hands left her breasts and wrapped around her thighs, tugging her pussy closer to his mouth.

Her face was flushed with heat at the mere thought of wearing such body adornments. Then she couldn't think at all as she lost herself in his touch.

His tongue stroked up one side of her labia and then down the other, parting her slick folds. Moisture seeped from her core as her inner muscles clenched and released. She plumped her breasts in her hands and continued to stroke and tease their tips.

Zane caught her clitoris between his teeth and flicked his tongue over it. Heat suffused her entire body, engulfing her in the flames of desire. He slid one of his hands between her legs and pressed the tip of one finger just inside her slit. She groaned and squirmed, trying to push him deeper.

He sucked her clit hard and then released it. "Tell me what you want."

"Put your fingers inside me."

He thrust one finger and then inserted another one. Her inner muscles clamped down hard, drawing him deep. "Yesss," she hissed as he slowly withdrew them and plunged them inward again.

Sophia rode his mouth and his fingers as he pushed her closer to the edge. She could feel her orgasm gathering within her. Her body was fluid as she followed its cues, shifting and moving to get the maximum pleasure. Her skin was covered in a light sheen of sweat, her hair plastered to her scalp as she pushed forward, seeking.

Her hands dropped from her breasts to tangle in his hair as he sucked her clit harder, his fingers pushing deep within her. It flashed over her, exploding within her. She came in a rush of release that gushed from her core, coating his fingers. His arm banded around her, keeping her close to him as he continued to pleasure her with his mouth and fingers. She convulsed hard, all feeling centered between her thighs.

Closing her eyes, she rode the waves until she felt replete. She practically melted against Zane, slumping forward. He shifted her body easily, sliding her down his own body so that she was once again draped across his torso. His arms locked around her, hugging her close and she snuggled into his chest, nuzzling the patch of chest hair with her nose.

With her eyes still closed, she trembled as the occasional aftershock shook her. As her body relaxed and began to cool, she shivered. Zane yanked the ends of the bedcovers, pulling part of them over her. She snuggled closer, seeking his heat.

The tip of his cock nudged her behind, letting her know that he still wanted her. She raised her head and stared down at him. She could see the strain on his face, see the tinge of red in his eyes. Knew what he wanted.

Sitting up, she scooted back so that her slit was poised just above the tip of his cock. She slowly rocked back and forth, teasing the head of his shaft with her slick folds.

"Sophia," he moaned as he steadied her hips. He could easily have taken control, but he was allowing her to set the pace.

"Yes." She started to slide down him. Her inner muscles were still swollen and he was so thick that it almost hurt. But it also felt amazingly good. She pushed him another inch deeper.

Zane palmed her breasts, making her cry out. Her pussy clenched with growing need. She'd just come but she was close to doing so again.

She shifted again, taking another thick, hard inch into her body.

Then the phone rang.

Zane swore as he pulled Sophia toward him, impaling her on his cock. She sucked in a deep breath and he could feel her inner muscles clenching and relaxing, trying to accommodate him.

The phone rang again.

Sitting up, he reached into his back pocket and yanked out his cell phone. "What?"

There was silence on the other end and then a male chuckle. "Busy, are you?"

"Fuck you, Dalakis. What do you want?" Zane tried to calm his breath, tried to ignore the tightening of Sophia's hot pussy around him and concentrate on what Stefan was saying.

"We've been talking and studying the police reports." Zane had dropped off all the information he'd had before he'd come over to Sophia's. "We think we may have an idea of who may be behind this."

"Who?" Zane shook his head to clear it.

"That's the thing. We don't have a name, but we think we know who."

"That doesn't make any sense." Maybe it did and Zane just couldn't think properly with Sophia's lush body milking his cock.

"It does when you know the entire story." Stefan paused and then cleared his throat politely. "When can we expect you?"

"Fuck." Zane tucked his phone between his shoulder and his ear and wrapped his arms around Sophia to keep her from moving. She buried her face in the crook of his neck, her throaty little moans driving him crazy with desire. She was rocking against him and the motion was driving him out of his mind. His cock was throbbing and he was seconds away from coming and he damn well didn't want the other man hearing it. "Soon." He could barely get the word out as his fangs lengthened, his body demanding sustenance.

Stefan chuckled. "We'll see you when we see you."

Zane heard the line go dead and dropped his phone. He heard it bounce off the bed and clatter to the floor. He didn't care. The only thing that mattered was Sophia. Stefan Dalakis and his family could wait.

Gripping her hips, he lifted her and plunged her back down on his cock. Sophia nipped at his neck with her teeth. "Harder," she groaned.

Past all caring and reason, he lifted her again and again, driving his shaft as deep as he could with each thrust. Her fingers dug into his shoulders as she lifted and slammed her hips down onto his cock.

Her vagina gripped him hard. He couldn't see, he was so blinded by need. His balls pulled up tight and he came. "Sophia," he yelled as he pulled her down hard, driving himself deep. Semen flooded her pussy, setting off her orgasm.

Zane buried his face in her hair, breathing in her scent as her body milked his cock dry. Bloodlust roared over him, and as if she sensed his need, she tilted her head to one side, offering him her neck.

There was no hesitation. No thought of denying himself. She offered. He would take.

His fangs sank into her flesh. She jerked and he felt her pussy spasm around him. She cried out, wrapped her hands in his hair and held him tighter, pushing his face against her throat.

Zane groaned as her blood spurted into his mouth. His starving cells soaked up her essence. He drank slowly, knowing he couldn't take too much but wanting to savor every precious drop. When Sophia finally stopped convulsing and slumped against him, he withdrew his teeth and ran his tongue over the two small holes to close them. She shivered.

Reaching behind him, he fisted the covers in his hands. He managed to raise himself enough to yank them out from beneath him and then he bundled the blankets around Sophia. She burrowed closer to him and he held her tight, content just to feel the weight of her against him.

Finally, she lifted her head and blinked at him. She looked like a little red owl, her eyes bleary with exhaustion. "That was one of the Dalakis brothers?"

He nodded as he gently pushed a damp lock of hair off her forehead. "Yeah."

"What did he want?"

Zane didn't want reality to intrude but knew there was no other choice. "He thinks they may have a lead on the murderer."

Sophia sat straighter, the blankets slipping down and exposing her shoulder and one of her pert breasts. Zane yanked the cover back up, knowing that if he didn't they'd never get out of her apartment. "Who?"

He shook his head. "He was pretty cryptic about it. We should get going and go over there." He wanted to howl with the unfairness of it all. He'd discovered the perfect woman for him and there was no time to explore it, to just tuck her beneath the covers and talk.

It was laughable. He'd avoided romantic entanglement his whole life and now he was the one who wanted to snuggle down under the covers and talk. But Zane didn't feel much like laughing. He'd tried to stay away from Sophia for her own sake, but he just hadn't been able to. He'd known when he'd come here tonight that even if she'd

never wanted to see him again, he'd have protected her for the rest of her life. He had to be part of her life, even if that meant watching unseen from the shadows.

Then she'd opened her arms to him.

He knew Sophia was leery of relationships, and after what he'd discovered about her past, he wasn't surprised. On a hunch, he'd checked to see if Sophia had ever been in trouble with the law. Digging deep, he'd found her in the social services system. Sophia's mother had been a drug-addicted hooker who'd basically neglected her daughter until Sophia had run away from home just before her sixteenth birthday. It hurt Zane unbearably to think about Sophia out on the streets by herself.

By looking into her past, he was essentially invading her privacy, but he didn't care. He'd use any method it took to keep her in his life. Even as he'd tried to distance himself from her for her sake, he'd been unable to stop thinking about her, been unable to stop wanting to learn everything there was to know about her.

But there was no time. A murderer was on the loose and innocent women were being slaughtered. The man had made a mistake by dragging Sophia into this mess. She was his now and he'd do whatever it took to protect her.

Zane shifted her until she was seated across his lap. Curling one arm around her shoulders and the other beneath her legs, he stood. "First we shower, then we go to visit the Dalakis family."

She nodded, resting her head against his heart as he carried her to the bathroom.

Chapter Sixteen

Cassidy paced the small confines of his living room waiting for Blythe to wake up. He'd finally gotten her settled away in his bed near dawn and she'd slept the entire day away. He hadn't wanted to leave her but hadn't had much choice. Once the sun came up, he'd had to go over to the main house and keep watch. With several attacks on the family, he wasn't taking any chances. Intellectually, he'd known that Blythe would be safe tucked away in his apartment. As a man, he'd wanted to stand guard over her and keep her safe from all harm.

A wry grin crossed his lips. She certainly didn't make it easy on a man to take care of her. He'd gotten the distinct feeling that Blythe didn't think much of men as a species. Not that he blamed her. He'd done a bit of discreet digging, talking to some folks who'd worked at The Club the same time that she had. The picture they'd painted of her relationship with Prince wasn't pretty.

One former waitress had put it this way. "It was like he owned her. Dressing her up and having her do exactly what he wanted. She was like an accessory or something. He enjoyed the fact that other men envied him because they wanted Blythe and couldn't have her. But she hated him, you could tell. She never said anything, but you could see it in her eyes."

Cassidy had heard a variation of the same story from a bartender who'd moved to St. Louis after Katrina and from a cook, who'd gone on to open his own small restaurant. However he looked at it, Jethro Prince had had some kind of hold over Blythe.

Then there was her father. Again, Cassidy didn't have all the information, but he'd had no trouble uncovering the fact that Blythe's father had walked out on his family when she was only five years old, leaving her and her mother to struggle for years. Blythe's mother hadn't been strong emotionally and had been in and out of the hospital for years before she passed away a month ago.

Cassidy quietly walked across the room to stand in the doorway. She looked small and almost childlike as she slept. She didn't sleep sprawled out across the bed, but rather curled into a tight ball with the covers pulled protectively around her head. Only a cap of blonde hair could be seen above the blankets.

She certainly hadn't been childlike last night. In spite of her fatigue, she'd been more than vocal with her thoughts about him and the Dalakis family...

"You're all crazy. Certifiably insane." She'd closed her eyes, allowing him to carry her out of the house to the carriage house. He knew now that she'd been just gathering

her strength. The second he'd carried her up the stairs to his apartment, she'd struggled until he put her down.

"Blythe." He wasn't quite sure what he should say to her. He didn't want to lie to her, not even to protect the Dalakis family, and that told him just how deep he was in over his head. Hell, the woman didn't trust him, but it didn't matter. He wanted her more than he'd ever wanted a woman in his entire life. He'd lived thirty-five hard years, more than enough to know that this was more than just physical need on his part. He genuinely liked her. She was brave, compassionate and independent. Maybe just a tad too independent.

"You want to explain what I just saw in there?" She crossed her arms over her chest, rubbing her arms, her agitation plain.

Cassidy crossed the floor to the sofa, ignoring the way she shifted away from him as he passed. Grabbing a throw blanket from the back, he stalked over to her again and wrapped it around her shoulders. "You didn't see anything, Blythe. You're tired." The lie almost choked him.

"Don't patronize me." Her voice was level, but he could hear the underlying anger beneath it. He imagined that quite a few men had lied to her. "I know what I saw."

Sighing, he scrubbed his hand over his face. It was going to be a hell of a long night. Turning, he made his way back to his favorite chair and threw himself down into it. What he really wanted to do was take Blythe in his arms and comfort her, but he knew she wouldn't allow that. Yet. "Why don't you tell me what you saw?"

She licked her lips and pulled the soft throw tighter around her body. "I saw two men arguing with each other. Then their eyes changed color." She stared at him belligerently. "They were red and they glowed."

She said it almost as if she expected him to deny it. He nodded and she continued.

"Their teeth grew." She buried her face in the blanket, her shoulders heaved and then she raised her head to meet his placid gaze. "They had fangs. Both of them. They grew right in front of my eyes."

"Yes." Cassidy's fingers dug into the supple leather of the arms of the chair. She looked so lost, so bewildered. He wanted to protect her from this but knew that if they were ever going to establish any kind of relationship, he had to be honest with her.

"Yes," she repeated. "Is that all you have to say?"

He sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "What else do you want me to say?"

She seemed taken aback by his bluntness. Then she shook her head, sighed and slowly inched her way toward the sofa. Toward him. Cassidy held himself still and willed her to keep going.

"One of them said something about taking my memories. Could they actually do that?" The backs of her legs hit the edge of the sofa and she sat down heavily on the cushion.

"Probably." He reached out and laid his hand on her leg. The muscles jerked beneath his fingers, but she didn't pull away from him. "I'm not one hundred percent sure of the extent of their powers myself, but if Zane said they could, then I'm sure all of them can."

She picked at a loose thread on the blanket. "I can't even believe I'm talking about this like it's real. It's not real. There's no such thing as vampires."

She glanced back at him and Cassidy could see by the look on her face that she wanted him to agree with her and just laugh off the whole incident. He couldn't. "Why can't it be real?"

Blythe's big blue eyes widened and her mouth fell open. "Because," she sputtered, "it can't."

Taking a chance, he shifted from his chair to sit beside her on the sofa. Her eyes followed him, watching his every move. She reminded him of a small, hunted creature keeping an eye on a hungry predator. He would like to devour her, just not in the way that she imagined. He wanted to bring her pleasure, not pain.

"It can and it is."

"No." She shook her head vehemently. "I don't know what kind of a scam you guys are pulling. I don't care if you're mafia or criminals. I just want to get away from here. I just want to be left alone."

"I'm sorry, Blythe." Cassidy reached out his hand to cup her cheek and felt anger churning inside him when she flinched as if she'd expected to be hit. Her expression was flat, giving away nothing. It was as if she'd distanced herself from him and the situation.

"You can't keep me here."

He gave in to his need to touch her, gently grazing the side of her face with his fingers. The dark bruising on her smooth, pale skin was obscene. "No, I can't keep you here. Not indefinitely. But, Blythe, it's not safe for you out there. Why don't you stay here for a few days until the heat dies down? If you still want to leave after that, I'll help you."

Her eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why would you help?" He could see her mind working furiously to try to figure out his angle. "You want to sleep with me."

She stood and threw off the blanket, her fingers going to the hem of her blue sweater. She whipped it over her head and tossed it aside. Cassidy could feel his cock swelling at the sight of her ample breasts cupped lovingly by pale blue silk. She went gracefully to her knees in front of him, reaching for the opening of his jeans.

"Is that what it will take for you to let me go, Sam? I can give you the best blowjob you've ever had if that's all you want." Her voice was husky, but her eyes were flat. Dead. He could tell by her expression that she didn't really want to do this but was

prepared to do whatever she felt she had to. It was like a bucket of cold water being dumped over him.

He blinked, once again seeing the bruise on the side of her face, the bruises that ran along the length of her rib cage. He grabbed her hand, flattening it against his stomach. She slid it out of his grip and curled her fingers over his erection. He sucked in a breath. Damn, that felt good, but it wasn't what he wanted and certainly wasn't how he wanted it. He wanted Blythe to want him, not to use her body to bargain with him.

Leaning forward, he plucked her off the floor, mindful of her injuries, and pulled her into his lap so that she was straddling him. Her breasts brushed against his chest and he could feel the hard nubs through the thin fabric of her bra. He figured she was more cold than aroused. She grabbed his shoulders for support but held herself incredibly still. Cassidy leaned forward until their noses were all but touching. "Let's get something straight. I don't want anything from you. All I want to do is help you."

Confusion momentarily flashed across her face before disappearing behind her mask of indifference. "Whatever you say." She slid off his lap, picked up her sweater and calmly pulled it over her head as if nothing had just happened between them.

Cassidy felt like yanking his hair out he was so frustrated. His cock was throbbing worse than a damn toothache and his balls were so tight they were painful. He stood, discreetly adjusting himself while she was busy with her sweater. It didn't help. He was in for one hell of a long night.

Sighing, he held his hand out to her. "Come on. You can take a long, hot bath to soak your aching muscles. After that, you need a long night's sleep. We can figure everything out in the morning."

"I'm not forgetting that you think your employers are vampires," she warned as she picked up the throw and wrapped it around herself.

He slowly lowered his hand, trying not to take her continued rejection of him personally, but it was hard. He wanted her to trust him and to want him the way he wanted her. But he was old enough and smart enough to know that might never happen.

Determination filled him. He wanted time to explore his feelings for Blythe. He was in this for the long haul, not a one-night fling. There was time and he was patient. As long as he could convince her to stay here, he had a chance at earning her trust. After that, he'd see what he could do about the rest.

He motioned her down the short hallway to his bathroom. She waited for him to lead the way, following close behind him. Cassidy could feel her eyes on him as he started the water running in the tub and pulled out a large, fluffy towel, laying it on the long countertop. "If there's anything else you need, just ask." His voice was husky with barely suppressed need.

She nodded, sidling away as he moved toward the door. Patience, he reminded himself. As he passed in front of her, she reached out and touched his arm. He froze, turning only his head to look at her.

"Thank you."

He gave a quick, hard nod. "You're welcome. I'll get you something to wear after your bath." He didn't want her gratitude, but she had reached out and touched him of her own accord. It was a beginning...

The bundle in the center of his bed moved, bringing him back to the present. "Are you going to stand there and watch me all day?" Her voice was husky with sleep. She pushed away the covers, revealing her flushed face and tousled hair. She looked and sounded like a woman who'd spend the day being pleased by her lover.

Cassidy pushed away from the doorframe and ambled into the bedroom. Blythe sat up quickly, dragging the blankets with her. He caught a glimpse of her bare shoulder and realized that, at some point during the night, she'd shucked the T-shirt he'd given her to sleep in. He desperately tried not to think about the fact that she was naked beneath those covers, her bare flesh pressed against his crisp, white sheets.

He'd fantasized about having Blythe naked and spread across those same sheets, her arms and legs open in welcome. Clearing his throat, he tried to remember what she'd said. "Actually, the day is gone and it's evening again. You slept the entire day away."

Her eyes widened and she stared at him in disbelief. "That's impossible."

He shrugged. "Impossible or not, you've done it." Ambling over to the window, he tugged back the curtains. "You have to be hungry. How about some soup and sandwiches? Or maybe an omelet and toast." He wasn't a great cook, but he could manage that.

The rustling of bedcovers being shifted reached his ears and he struggled not to turn around. He'd love another glimpse of her creamy white skin. His body was once again as hard as a rock. He'd managed to get his desire for her under control when she was asleep, but now that she was awake, it was back.

"An omelet would be nice."

Unable to resist, he faced her. Once again, she was wrapped in a blanket, but her shoulders were bare. Damn, but she was delicious, looking good enough to eat. Ignoring the ever-present wariness in her eyes, he strolled over to stand beside her. She looked much better than she had last night. The bruises on her face were in full bloom, but there wasn't much swelling thanks to the ice pack that he'd insisted she use after her bath last night.

Reaching out, he nudged a lock of hair off her forehead, smoothing his hand over her hair. When he reached her shoulder, he ran his fingers over the curve. "How are you feeling?"

Her chest was rising and falling rapidly as if she were having a hard time getting air. "I'm...I'm fine."

"Stiff?"

She shrugged. "A little, but not too bad." She stood there while he traced the line from her shoulder to her neck and back again. "Cassidy?"

"What?" He loved the feel of her skin and the fact that she smelled like his soap. It made him feel even more possessive.

"Umm, I'd like to get dressed now."

"Sure." He leaned down and brushed a quick kiss across her parted lips. It was over before it began. Turning on his heel, he headed toward the door. "Come on out to the kitchen when you're ready. After you've eaten, we've got to go over to the main house and sort out the situation."

Blythe stood there like an idiot with her fingers touching her lips as she watched Cassidy leave. Her eyes strayed to his backside and she shook her head. She'd never stared at a man's ass before. Never cared to. Not until now. But if she were the type, she'd freely admit that Sam Cassidy had a prime one. He filled out his blue jeans to perfection.

Her mouth still tingled where his lips had touched them. She'd been kissed before, but she'd never felt anything like this. She'd never felt much of anything at all, truth be told.

Frigid! The word echoed in her brain, bringing her back to the present with a thud. She'd heard the same thing from men her entire life. As one of her ex-boyfriends had put it, she had a hot exterior, but a man could freeze his cock off inside her she was so cold.

Wrapping the blanket tighter around her, she sighed. She buried her face in the fabric, loving the way it smelled like Cassidy—sandalwood, spice and man. When she realized what she was doing, she tossed the covers aside and let the cool air wash over her flushed body.

She reached for her clothing, not relishing having to wear the same clothing again, but was pleasantly surprised to find her two tote bags and her purse laid neatly on the floor in front of the dresser. Unzipping both bags, she dug in and pulled out some clean underwear and a crisp, white long-sleeved blouse.

As she started to dress, she thought about last night. For a few moments before she'd come fully awake, she thought that last night had been nothing but a dream. The visit from Cassidy, the men that Prince had sent, the violence, Stefan Dalakis and his family. A shiver skated down her spine as she carefully stepped into her panties, pulling them up her legs. Now that was one scary man, and his brother wasn't much better. Then there was that guy. What was his name? York, Zane York. He was as bad as the Dalakis brothers, and if she was to believe them, they were all vampires.

Maybe she was more like her mother than she'd thought. She pulled on her bra, clasping it in the front and then reached for the blouse. The long sleeves would help cover the bruises on her arms and keep her warm. Even though it wasn't that cold, she felt chilled to the bone.

Her mother hadn't dealt well with reality and had spent as much of her life medicated or in mental hospitals than she had out in the real world. Blythe had had to grow up quick to care for both of them. The alternative was foster care and she'd much preferred to have her mother at home, even when she wasn't well. It hadn't been a hardship to take care of her mother. At least she knew her mother had loved her. Her mother might have had a lot of problems, but loving her child hadn't been one of them. Her mother had spent hours playing with and reading to Blythe as a child. Maybe she hadn't been able to physically provide very well for her, but her mother had tried. She'd held down waitressing jobs during her good spells. Those had been good times. Blythe felt tears welling in her eyes and blinked them away. Tears didn't help. They never had and never would.

Lowering herself back to the bed, she groaned as her ribs protested. In front of Cassidy she'd managed to pass her aches off as nothing, but truthfully, all she wanted to do was crawl back in bed and sleep for about two days uninterrupted. But that was a luxury she didn't have. She had to find out what was going on and how to get away from here.

She ignored the pang in the vicinity of her heart at the thought of leaving Cassidy. For some unknown reason, she felt safe around him. Protected. And if that wasn't the biggest fallacy in the world, she didn't know what was. Nobody would protect her but herself and she'd do well to remember that.

But still, the tenderness in his eyes as he'd touched her face, her shoulder and her neck had made her stomach clench. She'd felt hot and uncomfortable. Cassidy confused her, made her want to be different.

Well, she wasn't. She yanked on her jeans, this time welcoming the pain to clear the starry dreams from her eyes. It was time to be practical. Slipping her bare feet into a pair of loafers, she stood. She thought about making the bed, but her stomach growled, reminding her that she hadn't eaten in...well, she couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten.

Tossing the blanket on the bed, she carefully made her way to the kitchen. Cassidy was just taking an omelet out of pan and sliding it onto a large plate that already contained two slices of toast. A single place was set at the table with orange juice and coffee.

"Sit down and eat while it's hot." He slid the plate in front of her just as his phone rang. He grabbed his phone from the countertop and put it to his ear. "Cassidy."

Blythe lowered herself onto the chair and reached for the steaming cup of coffee. Adding two spoonfuls of sugar, she stirred and then brought the rich brew to her mouth. The first sip was like heaven. The second even better. By the third, she thought she just might start to feel like herself again.

Cassidy was listening intently as he watched her. Feeling self-conscious, she picked up her fork and knife and began to eat. Her awkwardness passed as she took the first bite. Flavor burst against her taste buds. She knew it was only eggs, cheese, mushrooms

and peppers, but it tasted better than anything she'd eaten in years. Digging in, she didn't stop until her plate was empty. As she popped the last bite of toast into her mouth and chewed, she realized that the room was too quiet.

She swallowed hard, reaching for her juice to wash down the bread. Cassidy was leaning against the countertop watching her. Even though he looked worried, a tiny smile played around the edges of his mouth.

"What?"

He shook his head. "Do you want more?"

She thought about it, but for the moment she was full. "No, I'm good. Thank you." The moment was awkward. She wasn't quite sure what else to say. The man had taken care of her last night, drawing her a bath, making sure she had an ice pack for her face before tucking her into his own bed. This morning, he'd brought in her clothing and cooked her breakfast. She just couldn't figure him out.

"You're welcome. If you're finished, we should go over to the main house. Zane and Sophia are due at any moment and Stefan's got some ideas about who might be behind the murders."

God, she'd forgotten all about that in the midst of everything else. "Your employers are involved in the murders?" She kept her tone even, not wanting him to take offense.

Cassidy swore and raked his fingers through his hair. "No, they're not involved, but someone is damn sure going to a lot of trouble to implicate them."

"No offense, but they seem to have a lot of enemies."

He tucked his phone in his back pocket as he shook his head. "Seems like that some days, but they're really nice folks." He paused, "Even if they are vampires."

Blythe pushed back from the table and carried her dishes to the sink. After she rinsed them, she put them in the dishwasher.

"Nothing to say?"

She shook her head. "If you want to persist in believing your fantasy, you go right ahead."

Cassidy reached for her, twining her fingers through hers. He held her loosely, not confining her. It felt almost...nice. She tightened her fingers around his. It wouldn't hurt to hold his hand. After all, the man had cooked her breakfast. She was just returning his kindness.

Yeah, right. She swallowed hard as he led her to the door. Who did she think she was kidding? She was beginning to believe that Sam Cassidy was the real deal—a good man. And if that was the case, she had better protect her heart. Because if he ever found out what she'd done, he wouldn't want anything more to do with her.

"You okay?" he asked softly as they walked down the stairs and through the garden.

"Fine. Just fine," she answered as she walked into the Dalakis home. The door closed behind them with an ominous thud.

Chapter Seventeen

Sophia flicked her gaze toward Zane, but he wasn't paying any attention to her, his concentration focused on both Stefan and Lucian. She sighed and turned her attention back to the women. She'd been hoping that tonight would be easier, seeing as how they were all on the same side in this thing, but if anything it was more tense.

"Would you like some more coffee?" It was Lucian's wife, Delight, who interrupted her musings.

"No thank you." When she and Zane had arrived, they'd been ushered back into the same study they'd met in the night before. She'd been pleasantly surprised to find a pot of coffee waiting on the table for her.

"Ignore them," Delight whispered as she leaned closer. "They're just being men."

"Meaning they have to act tough and manly."

The other woman laughed. "Exactly."

Laurel Rose sat next to Delight on the sofa, but she seemed preoccupied. Sophia wished they'd hurry up and get on with things. She had things to do tonight and there was a murderer on the loose.

"Sorry we held you up." Sam Cassidy strode in the room, tugging a reluctant Blythe behind him. The blonde woman looked a bit better than she had the night before, but not much. Whatever her story was, it was obvious to everyone there that Cassidy had taken it upon himself to be her protector. He settled her in a comfortable chair slightly away from the crowd. She looked at everyone and nodded, but didn't speak.

Stefan stepped away from the fireplace and faced them all. "Okay, it's obvious that the family is being attacked on two separate fronts." His green-eyed gaze was as cold as ice, his voice clipped. "Cassidy, it's up to you to monitor the situation with Prince. We'll act when necessary, but it would be nice if we could postpone it for a few days."

"I'm on it." Cassidy looked grim but determined. Beside him, Blythe sat forward and for a moment Sophia thought the other woman would speak, but she slowly eased back in her chair and turned her head away.

"That leaves the murders." Sophia sat forward as Stefan strode over to stand beside his wife. "Laurel Rose and I have been talking about things and we decided that there is too much of a coincidence between what happened to her three years ago and what's going on now."

"What happened?" Zane, who'd been standing quietly, walked toward the seating area and lowered himself into a chair. Tension permeated the room. Sophia held her breath.

"There was a preacher named Jeremiah Stoner." Laurel Rose's voice was husky. Sophia could see the pain that the memories brought the other woman.

"I can tell it," Stefan snapped.

Sophia jumped. Pure menace was rolling off Stefan in waves. He was one scary dude. But his wife just shook her head, blissfully unafraid and continued her story. "He was always telling me to repent." She gave a harsh laugh. "I had some psychic ability and he used to tell me and everyone who'd listen to him that I was in league with the devil." Laurel Rose's dark, indigo eyes seemed to hold the secrets of the world as she stared at Sophia and Zane. Sophia didn't doubt that the woman had abilities. There was an almost otherworldly quality about her, even more so than the others.

"Turns out, Jeremiah Stoner was the devil." Stefan sat down beside his wife and dragged her into his arms. It was fascinating to watch a big, bad vampire pamper and pet his wife. His massive arms wrapped around her and Laurel Rose leaned against his chest.

What must it be like to have that deep a connection with another person? She fought the urge to glance over at Zane. She could feel his concerned gaze fixed upon her.

"He was that." Laurel Rose picked up the story again. "I was on my way home from the store late one afternoon and he shot out one of the tires on my truck. I went off the road, slamming into a tree. He kidnapped me, tossed me into the trunk of his car and took me back to a secret room below his church."

Stefan growled, his eyes glowing a harsh red, his fangs flashing. Sophia was afraid to move, afraid to speak. Suddenly Zane was beside her, seated on the arm of her chair, his hand on her shoulder. She did glance up at him then and was shocked to see his eyes glowing and his sharp teeth flashing as well.

"It's real." The whisper from the corner had every head in the room turning toward Blythe.

"I told you it was." Cassidy crouched in front of Blythe and caught her chin in his hand. "I also told you that you had nothing to fear. I won't let anyone or anything hurt you."

Blythe nodded, but Sophia could see the fear and disbelief in her face. Sophia didn't blame her—she was still having a hard time coming to grips with the whole vampire thing herself.

Lucian walked over to stand beside Blythe. "You are a guest in my home and are therefore under my protection. Do you understand?"

Blythe nodded slowly, but then shook her head. "No. I don't understand any of this. Any of you." She pressed her back against the chair, trying to put distance between herself and the rest of them.

"You will come to no harm here. You have my word." Lucian bowed gravely as he gave her his pledge.

"But I don't know you," she whispered. Sophia felt sorry for the other woman who obviously hadn't had any idea what she was getting herself into when she'd decided to help this family.

Lucian drew himself up straight, his eyes flashing with indignation. "In over five hundred years, no one has ever questioned my word."

Blythe whimpered and Cassidy stood, placing himself in front of her. "Back off, Lucian. She's been through a lot and she's scared."

Lucian inclined his head in acknowledgement. "My apologies."

"This is all fine and good, but can we get back to the story?" Zane asked impatiently.

Laurel Rose nodded and rubbed her palms together as if she was suddenly chilled. "When I regained consciousness, I was tied to a stone altar and Jeremiah was standing over me with a silver dagger in his hands. He'd killed before. He believed that by drinking the blood of someone who was psychic, he could take their power. The man had abilities of his own, but he wanted mine."

Sophia's stomach lurched. "Oh my God. How did you escape?"

"I didn't." Laurel Rose squeaked as her husband squeezed her tighter. She patted his arm and he eased his grip on her, but not by much. Sophia could see the anguish on Stefan's face and knew that whatever was coming, it wasn't good.

"He slit my wrists and let my blood drain into a chalice. His plan was to bleed me dry and drink my blood. He was part of a cult, a sick group of people who believe as he did. Jeremiah started to brag about them. He said that they were everywhere. Men who knew the true meaning of power."

This was crazy. Sophia swallowed hard as she imagined herself in Laurel Rose's situation. The woman must have been scared out of her mind. "You weren't a vampire then, were you?" That thought popped into Sophia's head. If the other woman had been a vampire, then she wouldn't have been driving around in her truck before dark.

Laurel Rose shook her head, making her long, dark hair shimmer. "No. I was still human then."

"What happened?" Zane's tone was soft, almost gentle, as if he were afraid of upsetting Laurel Rose further.

"Stefan happened." A smile crossed Laurel Rose's face and for a moment, the sheer beauty of the other woman struck Sophia. She glanced lovingly at her husband. "I knew that Stefan would come for me as soon as he'd risen."

Laurel Rose said it so easily and acceptingly. Sophia knew that she'd have to accept it too if she wanted any kind of relationship with Zane. And she did. Desperately.

"He blasted through the door like a whirlwind. Jeremiah was shocked by the fact that someone else was more powerful than he was." Laurel Rose shook her head. "My recollection gets very sketchy right about here."

All eyes turned to Stefan and Sophia shivered at the fury that blazed in his eyes. There was no doubt in her mind that Jeremiah Stoner had died at his hands. She didn't blame him. Men like Stoner got off in courtrooms every day because of technicalities. Stefan would have wanted to ensure that Laurel Rose was safe. Zane would do the same for her. Of that fact, she had no doubt.

As if he could read her thoughts, Zane squeezed her shoulder and then began to rub her back. She shifted closer, resting her hand on his leg. His thigh muscles tensed.

"I made sure he'd never hurt anyone else again." Stefan said the words simply and without emotion.

Sophia glanced around the room to gauge everyone's reaction to his blunt statement. Both Lucian and Zane nodded with approval. No surprise there. Delight appeared only to be concerned about her sister-in-law. Probably because she knew her husband would do the same for her. And if what Sophia suspected was true, then Lucian had killed Jethro Prince to save Delight. Cassidy appeared resigned, as if he still had a hard time accepting how easily Stefan and Lucian killed, but because it was to protect their women, he approved. But it was Blythe who surprised her. Instead of being horrified, there was a growing look of respect in her eyes as she listened to Stefan continue his story.

"Laurel Rose was almost dead. She'd lost so much blood. So much." He buried his face in the curve of his wife's neck and took a deep breath. The scene was intimate and touching. Sophia knew then that Stefan would do anything to protect his wife. Anything. The murderer trying to frame this family had made a bigger mistake than he'd anticipated. He was as good as dead.

"We freed her, but it was too late to take her to a hospital." Lucian took up his post behind his wife, looming protectively over her.

"We?" Zane asked intently.

"We were all there. Cristofor and I were uneasy and had Cassidy drive all day to get us to North Carolina. We thought the women had taken the private jet to New York for business and shopping." He shot his wife a disgruntled glare.

"You thought you could trick us and we'd meekly go to New York and not suspect anything," his wife corrected. "Johanna and I headed to North Carolina as soon as she'd finished her business in New York. It was all over by the time we arrived."

Sophia remembered that Johanna was wife of the elder Dalakis and was also in charge of the family fortune. "What happened?" The reporter in her itched to tell the story, but she knew that this was one tale she'd never tell. Unless she wrote it in a fiction novel, that is. Not only did she feel the need to protect this family, but who the heck would ever believe her?

"Stefan did what he had to do to save her." Lucian sighed. "Although he was reluctant."

"He turned her into a vampire." Blythe whispered the words, but everyone heard them loud and clear. She was pale, her hand to her throat.

"He saved my life." Laurel Rose's voice was matter-of-fact. The way she looked at her husband left not a shadow of a doubt that she was happy with her life. "He took my blood and gave me his, changing me forever. Even after, he tried to walk away, thinking he was being noble, thinking that he'd changed my life without my consent."

"He did." Blythe was agitated, her fingers trembling as she clasped them in front of her.

Laurel Rose shook her head. "I love him. I'd already made up my mind that I wanted whatever time we had together. Why would I mind that he saved my life?" Reaching up, she stroked her husband's cheek. "Now the time we have together is hopefully much longer than it would have been."

Stefan's gaze encompassed the entire room. "The way the murderer is draining these women of blood and the fact that he wants my family to take the blame leads me to believe that Jeremiah Stoner may have told some members of his cult about us. He was secretive, but they must have communicated by phone or computer. He struck me as the type of man who'd need to gloat about his conquests."

Sophia nodded slowly, mulling the facts over in her mind. "That makes sense."

"But we don't know where he'll strike next?" She could hear the concern in Zane's voice and it matched her own.

"No, we don't," Stefan agreed. "But I suspect that he'll tire of his sick game soon and try for one of our women. And that includes Sophia and Blythe now."

Blythe shot out of her chair. "Great. That's just great. All I wanted to do after Jethro Prince died was to live a peaceful life." Her entire body was trembling. "Now, not only is his brother trying to kill me, but a lunatic murderer might want to drain my blood and drink it as well."

Sophia sympathized with Blythe. She wasn't too keen about having a crazed lunatic after her either, but at least she'd been brought in on it from the very beginning. Poor Blythe was having this thrust upon her simply because she'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"I'll protect you." Cassidy stood with his hands on his hips, glaring at Blythe who stared back at him as if he'd lost his mind.

"Sure. You'll protect me from two killers. Who the heck will protect you?"

Uh-oh. Sophia could see the fury building in Cassidy. Blythe had just cast aspersions on the guy's ability to protect her. The testosterone in the air thickened as Sophia continued to watch. It was like watching a car accident. You knew something was going to happen, but there was nothing you could do to stop it. Nor could you look away.

"I don't need protection," Cassidy gritted out from between clenched teeth. "And I sure as hell can protect you. I don't care how many killers there are."

"That's ridiculous. You should have just let me leave." They were toe-to-toe now. Both blond, but Cassidy was so much larger than Blythe. It looked almost comical, but

Sophia knew that neither of them felt like laughing. This entire situation was crazy – vampires, crazed cult killers, local crime lords.

“You aren’t going anywhere.” Cassidy looked like he wanted to take Blythe and shake her. His hands were clenched into fists by his sides. He practically vibrated with anger.

“Enough.” Stefan stood with Laurel Rose still in his arms. “All the women must be protected.”

“What about the men?” Delight came to her feet and shot a worried gaze at her husband.

“So far only the women have been targeted by the cult, but it’s a completely different situation with Prince. He seems to want all of us dead.” Lucian came around the sofa and wrapped his arms around his wife. “We’re all in danger, especially those of you who are not vampires.”

“That may be, but we’re not helpless during the day – or during the night either, for that matter.” Cassidy had gotten a grip on his temper, but it was still simmering just below the surface. Sophia was impressed with the man’s self-control.

“Agreed,” Lucian replied easily. “For better or worse, we are all in this together and until it is over we have to act together if we are all to survive.” He pointedly stared at Blythe.

She threw up her hands in defeat. “Okay. I’ll stay until this mess is sorted out, but no longer.” She shook her head and muttered, “It’s not as if I had someplace better to be anyway.”

“Thank you.” Lucian inclined his head. “Now we must plan.”

They all sat back down. This time Cassidy and Blythe moved over with the rest of them. Eight people in all – five vampires and three humans. Sophia shook her head at the twist her life had taken.

“We need to try to find where the murderer is. He’ll have another space where he drains the bodies of blood. He kills them somewhere else and then moves the body to the cemetery after the fact.” Cassidy gave a report of all he’d learned. “Both victims lived in the same area of the city. So that’s where we start. We assume he’s living in that area as well, trolling for women. He wouldn’t want to have to transport them far, drain them and then move them all the way back into the city again.”

Sophia nodded. “I’ve still got contacts on the street. I can see if anyone’s heard or seen anything.”

Cassidy nodded. “I’ve got snitches too. I’ll talk to them.”

“Stefan, Lucian and I need to get out on the streets. The human mind is easy to read for the most part. Maybe we’ll pick up on something.” Sophia could tell Zane was itching to get moving.

“That’s a good idea,” Stefan agreed. “But Jeremiah Stoner was a natural blocker. I could not read his thoughts. I could pick up on some emotions, but not his thoughts.”

"Good to know." Zane stood. "If we come across a male in the area who can block us, we should follow him to find out where he lives. Cassidy and I can access records at the gas and phone company and find out if anyone is new to the city."

"Call in if you want me to check out anyone for you. I've got sources of my own." Sophia wanted to get working. She didn't want the cops finding another woman's body. This murderer had to be stopped.

"If there is any trouble, go down to the tunnels." Sophia's ears perked up as Lucian spoke to his wife.

"Tunnels?"

"There are secret passageways between this house and Stefan's. There is also a tunnel that leads to a building in the next block." Sophia tried to imagine the logistics of building such a thing. It boggled the mind.

Lucian chuckled. "The walls are four feet of solid concrete and Stefan and I keep them very well maintained for emergencies."

"I'll go and scout out around The Club and keep an eye on Adrian Prince," Cassidy announced. "We can't forget about him."

The group broke up, separating into couples. Zane tugged her over to a quiet corner of the room. "Promise me you'll stay here until I get back."

She met his green-eyed gaze and nodded. "If you promise to come back for me this time."

His eyes clouded with regret. "I promise."

"Good enough." She wanted to grab him and make him stay with her, so she turned her attention to the other couples in room. Stefan and Laurel Rose were locked in a heated kiss. Lucian had Delight wrapped in his arms and the way they were staring at one another was too intimate for her to watch without getting a pang in the vicinity of her heart. Now, Cassidy and Blythe were interesting. Blythe was obviously protesting something, but Cassidy just kept shaking his head. Finally, Blythe gave up in frustration. She turned to leave, but Cassidy pulled her back into his arms. They both stared at each other and then he lowered his head.

Sophia turned away, her face flushed, her body aching. Everyone seemed to be getting kissed goodbye but her. Zane's hands fell onto her shoulders and then she was spun around. She didn't have a chance to take a breath before Zane's mouth was on hers. He tasted of a desperation that matched her own as he consumed her. His tongue tangled with hers as his hands shifted down to cup her ass, pulling her pelvis against his. She could feel the heat and the hardness of him through his jeans.

He tore his lips from hers and she whimpered. "I have to go."

She could only nod.

Swearing, he dropped his hands from her. "Promise me."

"I'll be here when you get back."

Turning on his heel, he strode from the room. Stefan, Lucian and Cassidy followed, leaving only the women in the room. "Okay, let's get started." Grabbing the bag with her laptop, Sophia strode to the desk at the far end of the room. "Gather around, ladies, and tell me everything you know."

Chapter Eighteen

The days that followed were busy for everyone. The men took to the streets every night, combing them for any hint of the murderer. Cassidy and Sophia both talked to their informants, but nobody seemed to know anything, or if they did, they were too afraid to talk. The women worked from Lucian's office—Delight, Laurel Rose and Blythe, eager to do anything they could to help. It had become their unofficial base of operations.

Sophia was quickly becoming fast friends with all the women. They were such a diverse group, split between vampire and human, and they all had unique personalities. She was the go-getter of the group, the most vocal, but that wasn't surprising considering her profession. Laurel Rose was quieter, but had a level head. When she spoke, everyone listened. Delight was like the girl next door, but with an edge. She was no pushover and wasn't afraid to do whatever had to be done. Blythe was a bit trickier. She held herself back from the group, almost as if she didn't quite trust the friendship they offered. Sophia didn't know the other woman's story, but she had a feeling that Blythe hadn't had an easy life. Besides which, Blythe was having a much harder time with the whole "vampire" thing. Still, even she was beginning to loosen up around the rest of them.

They were an odd group, but for the first time in her adult life, Sophia felt as if she had real female friends. Yes, they worked hard, manning the phones, searching the Internet for clues about the cult and for information about Adrian Prince, but there was only so much they could do. After a while, they'd break off and sit around and chat. Sophia and Blythe would drink coffee and munch on cookies that Delight had baked—and who knew a vampire would like to bake and could make killer chocolate chip cookies—while they talked about that time-honored topic among groups of women. Men.

Delight and Laurel Rose were a wealth of information about how to deal with overbearing males, especially vampire males. Sophia found herself enthralled by their stories, laughing sometimes until she was almost in tears. There was no doubt that the women's husbands loved them, but sometimes they could be a tad autocratic. Sophia could definitely relate.

Just before dawn, all the men would drag themselves home, disappointed at finding nothing. Cassidy continued to monitor the comings and goings of The Club and Adrian Prince, but since the last episode where he'd tried to hurt Blythe, Prince had done nothing untoward. Cassidy also took over security during the day, catching catnaps when he could. Strangely enough, the stress and strain was harder on the humans than the vampires. Come dawn, the vampires would drop into a deep sleep

whether they wanted to or not. Sophia knew that she wasn't sleeping very well and from what she could see, neither were Cassidy or Blythe.

Everyone had argued quite long and loud, but Sophia insisted on going home every morning just before dawn. She had a job to do and she couldn't afford to be away from her home office. She had to keep working if she wanted to eat, so she kept writing articles about the murders as well as several magazine articles that had been contracted before she'd stumbled into this whole mess. Keeping busy helped her feel almost normal, which she desperately needed right now. Her life was anything but normal and hadn't been since she'd gotten that first phone call from the killer.

Zane wasn't too thrilled with her decision. He insisted on taking her home each morning, admonishing her to be careful as he slipped away before the sun came up.

She was worried, but not overly so. So far, the mysterious telephone caller had made no overt threat to her person. It had been quiet on the streets for almost a week now, but nobody was fooled. They were all waiting for either Prince or the murderer to strike again. Everyone's nerves were wearing thin and tempers were beginning to fray.

Zane had come back with the rest of the men about two hours before dawn. They were early tonight, but everyone was frustrated and Sophia suspected that both Lucian and Stefan wanted to spend time with their wives before they all went into their deep daytime sleep. Sophia didn't blame them. She wanted some time alone with Zane. It had been way too long since the episode in her office. They hadn't even talked about their future yet. It was as if they'd both silently agreed to put it off until after the murderer was stopped and the problem with Prince was taken care of.

She also was wondering how he was feeling about the whole "newfound" family thing. Yes, he spent time with Lucian and Stefan every night, but she didn't think they were forging any deep familial bonds just yet. Zane wouldn't find it easy to trust the other men nor, she suspected, would they find it easy to trust him. But the more time they spent together, the easier they seemed to be around one another. Nothing like tracking down a crazed murderer to bring a family together.

"You okay?" Zane's arm tightened around her shoulders and he pulled her tighter beneath his arm. The weight of his arm felt good wrapped around her.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just wondering when something is going to give." Using her keys, she unlocked her door and Zane pushed it open, stepping into the room ahead of her. Sophia was used to the routine by now. He kept her behind him as he searched the apartment with his superior senses. Once he'd deemed it safe, he pulled her inside, shutting and bolting the door.

Tossing her purse and keys on the small hutch just inside the door, she then laid her laptop safely on the floor and slipped out of her lightweight jacket, hanging it on the coat rack. Zane prowled the apartment, slipping from room to room as if to verify that the place were indeed empty.

Sophia yawned. "I'm getting a shower before I come to bed."

Zane walked over to her and dropped a casual kiss on her lips. "Go ahead. I've got to call Cassidy and let him know that you're home okay."

As she kicked off her shoes and padded down the hall, she could hear Zane's deep voice as he began to talk to the other man on the phone. All of them were being careful. Cassidy would call her every other hour of the day to check on her and his number was on the speed dial of her cell phone.

Yawning again, she rubbed her tired eyes as she flicked on the bathroom light and stared at herself in the mirror. Her eyes were bloodshot and there were dark circles beneath them. No wonder. She hadn't had more than a couple hours' sleep at a time in days, partly because Cassidy kept phoning her during the day and partly because she just couldn't sleep. There was too much going on in her brain to allow her to rest.

Her red hair was standing up in spikes, mostly because she kept running her fingers through the mess. Her face was paler than usual, making her freckles appear even more prominent. She wasn't a raving beauty to begin with. At the moment, she didn't even look passable. She looked like a woman who hadn't slept in a week, which was exactly what she was.

Sighing, she turned away from the mirror and twisted on the taps in the shower, testing the water with her fingers. When it was ready, she pulled her top over her head and dropped it to the floor. Her bra followed. She'd started wearing one on a regular basis since she started spending so much time with the others. It made her feel more secure or something. She only knew that she felt undressed without it.

Bending over, she yanked off her socks, adding them to the pile. It only took her a second to shimmy out of her jeans and panties and kick them aside. Then she stepped beneath the hot spray, moaning as the jets of water beat at her tired body.

She just stood there, enjoying the cascade of water against her skin when a shiver skated down her spine. Her flesh tingled and she knew she was no longer alone. Opening one eye, she stared out of the shower stall. Sure enough, Zane was leaning against the counter, his arms crossed over his chest as he watched her. His brilliant green eyes were ablaze with something she hadn't seen in days—lust.

He never took his eyes from her as he pushed away from the countertop and toed off his boots. She licked her lips and her breasts began to swell.

He proceeded to remove all his clothing in quick, economical motions. Before she could blink, he was naked, and there was no doubt that he wanted her. His cock was long and thick as it bobbed before him. She licked her lips again and felt her feminine muscles clench as he slid open the shower curtain and crowded in behind her.

Sophia turned to face him, letting the spray hit her back. Zane leaned down until his lips hovered just above hers. "Turn around." His voice, thick with need, made her shiver even though steam surrounded them. She made herself face away from him and waited to see what he would do.

She could feel the heat coming off his large body as he shifted closer. His chest pressed against her back, while his erection prodded her spine. His voice was deep as

he whispered in her ear. "I want you, Sophia. I need you." Teeth nipped at her earlobe, tugging it gently.

"Yes," she groaned, reaching behind to grab his flanks and pull him closer. She needed him too, desperately. Her pussy was pulsing with need as cream slid from her core. She felt empty deep inside and knew only he could fill her up and drive the loneliness away.

His arm reached around her and she sucked in a breath, hoping, needing him to touch her. Instead, he grasped the bar of soap and then both his arm and the soap disappeared from view. Her breathing deepened as her ears strained to hear him.

Then his arms came around her and his hands covered her breasts. Soapy and warm, he slid them over and around the small mounds, plucking at the puckered tips with his fingers. "That feels so good," she gasped as she thrust her chest forward.

"Yes, it does," he murmured and she could hear the pleasure in his voice.

One of his hands slid down her slender rib cage and rested on her stomach. She shifted from one foot to the other, pressing her thighs together to try to ease the growing ache. Zane's chuckle was low and filled with masculine satisfaction. "What do you want? Tell me what you want."

The heck with talking. Sophia grabbed his hand and pushed it between her legs, spreading them slightly to give him better access. His soapy fingers slid over her heated flesh. His thumb flicked her swollen clitoris. She gasped and then groaned. It wasn't enough. Not nearly enough.

"More," she demanded.

There was no more teasing, no more games as he thrust two fingers deep. Her inner muscles grasped them tight. Sophia panted as the hand still on her breast continued to pluck at her nipple, sending bolts of desire shooting from her breast to her pussy and back again.

Her body felt stretched tight and she knew she was going to snap. It had been a long week of wanting and waiting and she was more than ready. His fingers plunged in and out of her core, stretching her, and when his thumb pressed down hard on her clit, she came. Her hips jerked and she would have pitched forward were it not for the strong hold that Zane had on her. She trembled as liquid heat rushed from her core to drench his fingers.

"Beautiful," he whispered as he carefully removed his fingers. She cried out in protest, not ready to have him leave her yet. He lifted her hands, pressing them against the warm, wet tiles. "Spread your legs, Sophia. Let me inside you."

Her vagina clenched hard as she slid her legs apart. His hands were on her hips, urging her to push her bottom back toward him. Then she felt the hot, blunt tip of his cock being pressed just inside. Her swollen vaginal muscles clenched and relaxed to accommodate him. "Now," she whimpered, wanting his hard length to fill her.

One thick, muscled forearm wrapped around her waist and then he surged forward, filling her in one swift motion.

Zane pressed one hand to the wall for support. His large body trembled as he forged his way deep into Sophia. He could feel her body stretching to take him. Her cunt was hot and liquid from her orgasm, but it was also tight. Closing his eyes, he savored the feel of her wrapped around his cock, squeezing it in a silken vise.

It had been a hell of a long week and he'd missed Sophia dreadfully. He'd come for her at dusk and escort her to the Dalakis house over in the Quarter and then he'd have to leave her until just before dawn when he'd bring her home. He missed the closeness, the hot clasp of her body around him. In such a short time, he'd become addicted to her.

He'd learned much about his heritage in the long nights that he'd been sharing on the streets with Stefan and Lucian. They told him about the curse of the Dalakis family. At first, he'd been unbelieving, but eventually, he'd been forced to accept it as truth.

It seems that Dalakis men loved only once in their lifetime. Both men insisted that it was both a blessing and a curse. Right now, buried deep inside Sophia's body, he could understand the blessing part.

But it was more than just that. The women were always free to accept or reject that love. Many of their ancestors had given up ever finding their true mate and faced the dawn rather than live any longer without finding their true love. Others had done the same after being rejected by their chosen one. Thank God that Sophia had not rejected him, even after she'd found out what he truly was. He wasn't sure what he would have done. He'd like to think he would have walked away from her, but he wasn't sure that he'd have been able to.

His arm tightened around Sophia and he buried his face in her neck, breathing in her unique scent. He had choices according to his cousins. He could choose to stay with Sophia and let her live a normal human life and join her in death when it was her time to go or he could attempt to convert her if she were willing.

There was really no choice for him.

After what had happened between his mother and his father, he wouldn't risk converting her. His cousins had tried to dissuade him, citing their own wives as proof that it could be done successfully. But he wasn't taking any chances. If Sophia ever looked at him with hate in her beautiful pale green eyes, he knew it would drive him over the edge and into insanity as it had done with his father.

His life was now as long as hers and he didn't want to waste a single moment of it. Sliding his hand upward, he cupped her breast in his hand. So small and delicate, but so very sensitive. He tweaked her nipple and felt her inner muscles clench around him.

They were both breathing heavily now as steam surrounded them. He wanted to move but held himself steady, feeling his cock pulsing deep within her cunt. His balls were tight and heavy and he knew he didn't have much longer.

Inserting his other hand between her back and his front, he rubbed a finger over the tight opening of her ass. She shrieked and jerked in his arms. "Let me inside." He

flicked her nipple with his fingers, moving from one breast to the other. Groaning, she relaxed in his grasp.

His fingers were slippery with soap as he pressed the tip past the tight opening of her ass. He could feel her tense and nipped at the base of her neck with his teeth. He then soothed the sting with his tongue. "Relax."

She panted heavily and leaned her forehead against the wall. "I'm trying."

Zane pushed his finger deeper, feeling her stretch and expand. He pressed his finger to the front and could feel the pulsing of his cock inside her pussy. It was incredible. "Nobody has ever taken you this way before, have they?"

She shook her head as he slowly eased his finger out. "I'm going to fuck you this way someday if you'll let me. God, Sophia, you'd be so damn tight, we'd both go crazy."

"Yes," she moaned. "Anything. Everything. Just fuck me now."

Zane started to chuckle, pleased at her demands, but it turned into a groan as her pussy clenched him tight. Reaching his hand around to her front, he spread her labia wide and stroked a finger over her clit. He gently pinched her nipple rhythmically and she cried out his name.

Keeping up the teasing motions on her nipple and clit, he bent his legs until his cock was almost all the way out. Then he thrust back in. Hard.

"Zane," she cried, her fingers clawing at the tiles. He could hear the desperation in her voice—it matched his own.

His thrusts grew faster and harder, until his hips were pumping so heavily that her feet began to leave the floor with each thrust. She was whimpering now, her hot, moist cunt clenching him so tight he could barely slide his cock in and out.

"Zane," she screamed. Her cunt tightened around him so hard it was almost painful. Then she began to convulse.

He could feel his vision turning a hazy red and his fangs shooting down through his gums as he plunged deep one more time, pushing her feet right off the floor. Bloodlust roared through his veins, demanding satisfaction. The cool blood he had stored in his refrigerator at home and had been forced to consume this past week had only fed his hunger. He longed for Sophia's hot, rich blood.

He wrapped one arm around her waist, desperately trying to ignore the bloodlust growing inside him, and slammed his other hand against the wall for support as cum shot hot and deep within her. Her pussy milked his cock, wringing every drop from him.

He managed to keep them both upright as they shook and trembled. Sophia tilted her head to one side, exposing her neck. He could see the heavy throb of her pulse. "Are you sure?" he growled, already licking his lips in anticipation.

"Do it."

He needed no further urging. Her skin was wet and salty as he licked it. He sank his fangs deep and his cock began to pulse again as sweet, hot blood hit his tongue. Sophia cried out and convulsed as another orgasm hit her.

He drank and could feel his cells sucking in her essence, making her a part of him. He would never leave her. Never. She was his for as long as they had together and he would cherish every moment.

Sophia shivered and he suddenly realized that the water had gone cold. Carefully withdrawing his fangs, he stroked his tongue over the pinpricks, closing them and beginning the healing process. He slid his still-heavy erection from her body, catching her when she slumped toward the wall.

Holding her tight in his arms, he grabbed a washcloth and quickly cleaned them both up and then turned off the water. Steam filled the small room as he lifted her out of the shower and leaned her against the counter. Grabbing a towel, he quickly dried them both off and then lifted her into his arms once again. She didn't even open her eyes as he carried her into her bedroom and tucked her into bed.

He knew he had to leave, but he wanted to hold her in his arms and feel her heartbeat against his. Just a few minutes. What could it hurt?

Ignoring the warning in his mind, he slid in beside her. She rolled toward him, settling her head on his shoulder and pressing a hand over his heart as if she'd been sleeping with him for years. It felt right and good.

He'd only stay a moment and then he'd leave. Settling himself, he soaked in the pleasure of having her next to him.

Chapter Nineteen

Cassidy was frustrated. Raking his fingers through his hair, he tried to calm himself before he went into the library to get Blythe. They'd all called it quits earlier than usual, but it was still only about an hour until dawn.

He stalked into the room and then came to an abrupt halt. Blythe was curled up in one corner of the sofa, fast asleep. She looked younger in sleep, less guarded. Her blonde hair covered the pillow, creating a halo around her face. Damn, she was beautiful. But it wasn't just her beauty that drew him. He was too old to be attracted to just a pretty face.

No, it was Blythe herself. The inner strength that shone from within her. The shy way that she was around the others. She was a contradiction—one minute brash, the next uncertain. She wore her attitude around her like a shield, keeping them all at arm's length. Not that he blamed her. Her life certainly hadn't been a bed of roses, but still, he found it frustrating.

She made a small snuffling sound, but didn't wake. He strode toward her, making sure his boots made no sound against the hardwood floor. Cassidy eased down onto the sofa beside her, but her eyes popped open the second he touched the cushion. Fear filled her eyes, but she quickly hid it behind her mask of indifference. Cassidy wanted to howl and yell and beat his fists against the wall. Instead, he hooked a strand of hair around her ear and then brushed the edge of his finger against the line of her jaw.

Arousal, swift and immediate, filled him. It was always like this around Blythe. And she wasn't immune either. As he watched, her throat moved convulsively as she swallowed. He sensed her uncertainty and knew that she wasn't quite sure if she wanted to move away from him or toward him. They'd been playing this battle out all week.

Cassidy made the decision for her, sitting back and giving her space. He liked to think that it was disappointment that filled her face, but with his luck, it was relief. She pulled herself up into a seated position, putting even more distance between them. Barely stifling a yawn behind her hand, she stared at him. "No luck?"

Her voice washed through him like a physical caress. Soft, sultry and sleep-filled, it was the kind of voice a man dreamed of hearing in the middle of the night. It was the voice of a lover, sated and exhausted but wanting more.

Cassidy swallowed hard and shook his head. "None." He tried to ignore his hard-on, but it was impossible. His earlier irritation returned. "We're hitting nothing but dead ends on both sides."

Blythe reached out and brushed his arm with her hand. He felt that small caress ricochet throughout his body, heating it, hardening it. "You'll catch a break soon. I know you will."

The walls of the room seemed to close in around him. Cassidy needed to get out of here, needed to get Blythe out of here. He wanted her all to himself and there was no privacy to be found in this house. Cassidy knew that Lucian and Delight were still up and around, and although he knew they wouldn't intrude, he wanted Blythe in his home.

Standing, he held out his hand to her. "Come on. It's time to go home." It was deliberate, his use of the word home. She stared at his hand and then into his face as if searching for answers. He kept his face impassive, but couldn't help the bolt of satisfaction that shot through him when she reached out and took his hand. He helped her to her feet and then wrapped his arm around her, guiding her toward the back door. He stopped long enough to check the monitors around the garden and set the house alarm before ushering her quickly across the still-dark garden and into the carriage house. Resetting the alarms on his own place, he then led her up the stairs and into his apartment.

Home. He supposed it was as much of a home as any place he'd lived over the years. Up until Blythe had come to stay with him, it had just been a place to sleep and to house his stuff. But since she'd come, the place had taken on an entirely different feeling.

Whether she knew it or not, Blythe was a nester. He'd seen small signs of it in her old apartment. The mismatched furniture that had been refinished, the brightly colored thrift store plates and glasses stacked neatly on an open shelf and the myriad pillows that had been scattered across her futon. She hadn't had much, but she'd made her space comfortable, her own. Now she was doing the same thing to his place.

Little things, like an old glass jar filled with flowers from the garden that turned up in the center of his kitchen table and the fact that a blanket from his closet was now draped artistically across the back of his sofa. And instead of being pissed that she was messing around with his space, he was charmed and pleased. He wanted her to feel comfortable and settled. Wanted her to feel at home. Wanted her to stay.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. That was the bottom line. He wanted Blythe to stay with him. Forever. Deep down he knew that she was waiting for this to be over so she could get on with her life. Without him.

He watched her scurry off to his bedroom—hers now, he supposed. He glanced down at the sofa, resigning himself to another sleepless night. God, he was tired. The past week he'd caught only a few catnaps here and there. He was running on empty and he knew it. None of them could keep this up indefinitely. It was starting to fray everyone's nerves to the breaking point.

He glanced over at the bedroom door, brooding as he yanked off his boots and socks. His mood grew darker as he hauled the tails of his shirt out of his jeans and

undid the buttons. If she thought she was going to get rid of him easily when this was over, she was in for a big surprise. His hands stilled as he slid the last button out of its hole. And if she knew what he was thinking, she'd run now. Patience was the key. Patience and time.

She was getting used to him, to all of them. Cassidy watched her sometimes when she was with the other women and knew she was beginning to relax around them. That was a plus as far as he was concerned. The closer she connected with them, the less likely she was to be able to walk away from all of them when this was over.

Plus, she was starting to get used to him as well. Small things, like the way she took his hand back at the house and then let him keep his arm around her as they walked back to the carriage house. A week ago she wouldn't have reached out to him at all and would have either shrugged off his arm or stiffened beneath it.

Rolling his shoulders to try to release some of the tension, he closed his eyes and tried to ignore his throbbing dick. His eyes flew open when he heard a slight sound. He wasn't worried though. Cassidy knew it was Blythe. Her warm, floral scent had wafted through the doorway just before he heard the shuffle of her feet.

She was staring at him, hunger warring with uncertainty in her eyes. He could not ignore the unspoken plea. Slowly, he stalked toward her, giving her plenty of time to slam the bedroom door in his face. She stood there watching him, her blue eyes growing larger with each step he took. Her cheeks, normally pale, were tinged with pink. The bruises that had marred her face, making it sallow and dark, had faded somewhat, but her soft skin was still marked by the trauma she'd been through.

Her chest was rising and falling with each breath she took, making her breasts jiggle. She'd removed the clothing she'd been wearing earlier and was now clad only in a pale blue T-shirt that barely skimmed the tops of her thighs. Her long, smooth legs were bare and he couldn't tell if she was wearing any panties or if she was totally naked beneath her shirt.

Cassidy's heart pounded and his own breathing was harsh as he stopped right in front of her. He was so close that his bare toes touched hers. Blythe had to tip her head back to look at him.

Every muscle in his body was tense with anticipation. His blood pumped thickly through his body, most of it pooling heavily in his groin. His cock throbbed with a primitive rhythm, demanding he slake his lust. But he wanted more than that. He didn't only want Blythe's body, he wanted her very soul. It was only fair, since she already owned his.

He clasped her shoulders with his hands and was once again reminded of just how much smaller than him she was. She had such a vibrant personality, she seemed much larger sometimes. But Cassidy was always aware of how fragile she was, and not just physically. She'd been through some kind of trauma that centered around Jethro Prince.

Cassidy didn't know exactly what had happened between the two of them, wasn't sure he wanted to know. Just the thought of Blythe with another man was enough to

make him crazy, as illogical as that was. He knew she'd been with other men. At her age and as beautiful as she was, that was a given. But he wanted to be the only man from here on in.

She licked her lips and he followed the path of her tongue with his gaze. The vein in his temple was pounding. He swallowed hard. He wanted to cherish her, loving her slowing and carefully, taking the time to stroke every inch of her lush body. He wanted to ravish her, burying his cock in her heat and pounding into her until they were both sated. The intense contradictions held him immobile.

Then she went up on her toes and kissed him.

It was a gentle kiss. A mere brush of her lips against his. But it had been freely given. Cassidy's head swam with emotions and needs as he struggled to keep the kiss light and undemanding.

Then she stroked her tongue into his mouth and he lost it.

Plunging his tongue past her lips, he ravished her mouth. His hands slid from her shoulders to band around her back, locking her tight against him. The hard nubs of her nipples pressed against his chest even through the fabric of her T-shirt. Cassidy was fiercely glad he'd unbuttoned his shirt earlier. It allowed him to feel the soft mounds of her breasts and their rigid tips all the better.

Sliding one hand up her spine, he cupped the back of her head, threading his fingers through her hair. He tilted her head to one side, giving himself better access to her mouth as he continued to claim it as his own. His tongue stroked hers and he groaned as hers tangled willingly with his. She tasted sweet and addictive and he knew he'd never get enough of her.

The hand that was low on her back slipped lower. He had to know. His fingers pushed beneath the fabric and felt only warm, pliant skin. His brain almost exploded. She was naked beneath the shirt. No. As his fingers skimmed higher, he encountered a thin string. His hand stilled as his mind computed what this meant. She was wearing a thong. Somehow that was just as arousing as if she'd been wearing nothing at all.

Blythe whimpered as he stroked the cleft of her behind, tracing the path of the thin string. She pulled back, gasping for breath as she gazed up at him, her eyes almost blind with passion. Cassidy recognized her need. It was the same that pulsed through him.

His chest heaving, he stared down at the woman still clasped tight in his arms. "If you're going to say no, say it now." He barely recognized his own voice, it was so low and guttural. The finesse he usually had with women was gone. This woman brought out all this primitive instincts, drove all else from his mind. Still, he would do nothing to scare her, to harm her. Nothing!

In answer, she stepped away from him. Cassidy's hands dropped from her and fisted at his sides. His shirt was clinging to his back. Heat, wild and fierce, radiated from his aroused body. His balls ached and his cock throbbed. Still, he remained where he was.

Blythe's eyes seemed to focus on his hands and he forced his fingers to relax. He didn't want to frighten her, didn't want her remembering another man striking her. Her gaze flew to his face and whatever she saw there seemed to satisfy her.

Ever-so slowly, she held out her hand to him.

Blythe desperately reminded herself to breathe. It wouldn't do for her to pass out in a heap at Cassidy's feet. Her heart was pounding so hard she was surprised that it didn't burst. Her entire body tingled, her breasts felt swollen and aroused and her pussy was wet, aching with a need she'd never felt before.

Other men had touched her body and tried to kindle desire within her, but only this man had managed to do it. And he'd barely touched her. Fear crept into Blythe's mind, threatening to diminish the arousal, but by sheer will alone, she pushed it back. Just once in her life, she wanted to feel normal, wanted to truly desire a man. This might be her only chance. Once this episode with Adrian Prince was over, she'd leave New Orleans and begin a new life somewhere else and she'd never see Sam Cassidy again.

Just the thought brought tears to her eyes and she blinked them back. He stood there waiting for her to decide. That alone gave her the strength to go forward. She'd never met a man like Cassidy before. He made her feel special. To him, she was more than just a pretty face and a lush body.

His hands were fisted at his sides, but as she watched, his fingers relaxed. Her eyes jumped to his face. He knew she was afraid and he was doing his best to reassure her. It was her choice. She held her hand out to him and sighed when his closed around it.

She led him to the bed. Neither of them spoke as she slid her hands beneath his shirt and slipped it off his shoulders. His skin was slightly damp and his muscles jumped beneath her palms as she stroked them across his chest. He was so strong, yet always so gentle with her.

"Blythe?"

"Shh." She laid her finger over his lips. She didn't want to talk, didn't want to break the almost magical mood that seemed to surround them. Maybe it was because it was in the last vestiges of the night just before the dawn. Maybe it was because, deep inside, she was beginning to trust Cassidy. She knew she wanted him. He'd awoken something within her. Something she'd thought hadn't existed within her. He made her feel like a woman, with a woman's wants and needs, and she wanted this one chance to explore them before she had to leave this amazing man.

She couldn't stay. That was a given. Jethro Prince had taken that option from her. She shuddered and Cassidy said her name again. Rather than answer, she gripped the hem of her shirt and drew it over her head, dropping it to the floor beside her. Cassidy sucked in a breath and then leaned down to brush a light kiss across her lips. "You are so beautiful," he breathed as he peppered her jaw and throat with kisses.

She reached out blindly, clasping his shoulders for support as his lips continued downward. His hands cupped her breasts, his thumbs brushing her tight nipples.

Blythe whimpered as desire shot from her breasts to her pussy and back again as Cassidy continued to touch her.

His breath was warm and moist against her breasts as he nuzzled first one and then the other. Blythe wanted more. Wanted his mouth and his tongue to ease the ache that seemed to swell within her. As if he'd heard her unspoken plea, he stroked his tongue across one taut peak, making her shudder with need. Then he blew on the hard bud before drawing it into his mouth and suckling.

She slid her fingers into his hair and dug her nails into his scalp, pulling him closer. Cassidy groaned and suckled harder. Blythe could feel the moisture seeping from her pussy and sliding down her inner thigh. Her hips were swaying back and forth in a primal mating rhythm, silently urging Cassidy onward.

He released her suddenly and surged upward. Taken off guard, she tumbled down onto the bed. He followed her down, his hard, large frame covering her much smaller one.

Fear began to eat away at her desire. She tried to drive it back, tried to recapture the earlier feeling. Cassidy swooped down and captured her mouth, his tongue and lips practically eating her alive, stealing the very breath from her body. His hands seemed to be touching her everywhere. Stroking. Caressing. She could feel his heavy erection pressing against her thigh as he fingered the thin scrap of her panties.

Sweat broke out all over her body. Partly arousal, partly fear. Blythe lay paralyzed, unable to move forward, unable to stop. Her breathing became erratic and she could feel tears seeping out of the corners of her eyes, sliding down her temples and disappearing into her hair.

Cassidy suddenly stopped and pulled back. She could see the growing horror on his face and knew that she'd ruined her one chance with him. Sobs broke from deep within her and she rolled aside, curling into a tight ball of misery.

"Blythe?" He levered his body off her and wrapped his arms around her, making her cry even harder.

"I'm sorry," she managed to get out in between her tears. She tried to stop, but it was as if some dam within her had been broken. She hadn't cried in the long year she'd spent with Prince, or when her mother had passed away, but she cried now. Not only for what had happened, but for what, now, would never happen. She cried for the past and for the long, lonely future to come. For she knew now that something inside her had been irreparably damaged during her time with Prince. She wanted Sam Cassidy with every fiber of her being. Even now her body was still damp with desire, crying out for him. If she couldn't be with him, then she would never be with any man.

"Shh. It's all right, sweetheart," he crooned in her ear. She felt his arms slide beneath her and then she was cradled against his hard, warm chest, his heartbeat a comfort as she snuggled close to him. He murmured to her as she cried, words with no meaning that somehow calmed and reassured her.

Blythe didn't want to leave the safety and warmth of his arms, but she knew it wasn't fair for her to stay here. She could feel his cock against her hip. It wasn't as hard or large as it had been, but she felt like a tease sitting all but naked in his arms when she didn't plan on doing anything about it.

Without looking at him, she crawled out of his arms, tugged the covers over her and turned away. She knew it was cowardly, but she couldn't bear to face him. Not yet. Not until she was able to put the shattered pieces of herself back together again. She knew she'd never be the same, but she was a survivor and would manage somehow.

She waited for Cassidy to leave. Most men would have yelled and screamed at her. Many would have taken what she'd offered, even if she had changed her mind. All of them would have left her. But she should have known that Sam Cassidy would be different. He'd been surprising her, shattering her myths about men from the moment she'd met him.

The bed dipped as his full weight came down behind her. She tensed, but he did nothing but tuck the covers tighter around her before draping his arm across her and pulling her back tight against his chest.

"Sleep," he whispered against her ear. "Everything will seem better in the morning." She felt the light touch of his lips against her head and she felt her heart turn over. She knew then that she loved Sam Cassidy and because she loved him, she knew she'd have to leave.

The stress of the night overtook the workings of her mind and she felt herself drifting off to sleep just as the sun was rising over the city.

Chapter Twenty

Sophia awoke to a yell. She sat up in bed, blinking furiously. For a moment, she didn't even remember where she was. Then it all came flooding back—the shower, the amazing sex, Zane.

The first rays of sunshine were filtering in through the window.

Sunshine!

Panic hit her like a ton of bricks. She bolted out of bed and drew the drapes shut tight. Zane was on the floor on the far side of the bed away from the window. Sophia could see the slashes of red on his face, arms and chest where the sun's rays had hit him.

"Get under the bed," she yelled, but he didn't move. Scurrying back to his side, she winced at the burns on his body. They were already starting to blister. "Zane, you have to get under the bed."

His movements were sluggish as he dug his fingers into her area rug and tried to pull himself toward safety. She realized then that he was weakening as the sun rose on the horizon. Placing her hands on his body, she pushed, helping him slide beneath her bed frame. It was a tight fit, but they managed.

"Why didn't you go home last night instead of falling in bed next to me? Of all the lame-brained things to do." She continued to berate him as fear beat at her. "You'll be all right, won't you?" He always appeared so strong and invincible, it was scary to see him so weak. She realized just how vulnerable he was when the sun was out. Not only was he susceptible to its rays, his entire body weakened as it fell into a sleeping state.

"I'll be okay," he promised as he curled his fingers around hers. "The burns will be gone when I awake." She could see the hesitation on his face before he reluctantly continued. "I'll slip into my day sleep any minute. My heart will stop beating and I'll appear as if I'm dead." He watched her carefully and she forced herself not to react.

Sophia swallowed the lump in her throat and blinked back tears. "I'll be here when you wake at dusk. I've got plenty of work to do at home, but I'll be out for a few hours this afternoon." She could see the protest in his eyes. "I've got to go to the police station and see if there's been any new developments in the case. It's harder for them to put me off if I'm there in person. I'll be careful," she added as his eyelids fluttered closed.

"Promise." She could barely hear him now and bent lower.

"I promise I'll be careful." She kissed the tips of her fingers and then placed them over his lips. He sighed and relaxed. She waited and watched. He didn't move. Didn't even so much as twitch. She chewed on her bottom lip as she watched his chest. It

wasn't moving. Reaching out her hand, she tentatively placed it over his heart. Nothing. Nada. Zip. She'd been expecting it, but still it was very disconcerting.

"Okay," she muttered, sucking in a deep breath. "So my lover is a vampire. So what?" Shaking her head, she ran her fingers over the crisp hair on his chest one final time before levering herself off the floor.

She glanced at the window and then back at the bed. She wasn't satisfied that Zane had enough protection. She wasn't about to take any chances. Pulling the sheets off the bed, she spread them so that they were draped to the floor, covering one side and the bottom of the bed. Walking around to the other side of the bed, she did the same thing there using the blanket. Zane was surrounded on all sides. With the drapes closed, he should be okay.

She lifted up one side of the blanket and peeked beneath the bed. He hadn't moved a muscle since his eyes had closed. Sighing, she dropped the covering and turned away. She had work to do and Zane wouldn't be awake for hours.

After she had a quick shower and dressed, she gulped down a bowl of cold cereal and went to work in her office. The police had finally identified the second victim. Ariel Woodland had just been laid off work the week before she was murdered, so it had been days before anyone had reported her missing. Her friends had all assumed she was hiding out at home because she was depressed over losing her job.

"What did you two have in common?" Sophia pondered as she stared at the photos of the two women. They were very different in looks. Janice had been fair-skinned with light brown hair. Ariel was dark-skinned with long black hair. Janice had been a student. Ariel had been an unemployed office worker. There had to be something that attracted the killer's attention. Maybe it was simply that both women were in their early twenties and attractive, but Sophia felt in her bones it had to be something more.

Picking up her phone, she dialed the first number at the top of her list. It was time to talk to the family and friends of both victims. She dialed the first number, checking her notes to see what she knew about her first contact. Ann Perreault was a close friend of Janice Barton and the two women had gone to school together. Sophia tapped her pen absently against her pad of paper while she waited for the phone on the other end to be answered.

Ten minutes later, Sophia was on a first-name basis with the other woman and figured she'd learned all she could from Ann. The woman was devastated by the loss of her friend. "I'm sorry," Ann whispered. Sophia could tell she was desperately trying not to cry, but had already lost the battle.

"I'm sorry too. It must be hard to lose your best friend. I was just hoping that there might be something you could tell me that might shed some light on why Ms. Barton might have been targeted by the murderer."

"There is no reason," Ann retorted. "Janice might have been a bit odd at times, but she didn't deserve this."

"Of course she didn't," Sophia soothed. "I would never even suggest such a thing. I'm simply trying to figure out what it was about her that caught the eye of the killer. The more we understand about the situation, the better chance there is of catching him." Something Ann had said had caught Sophia's attention. "You said she was odd at times. In what way?" She could feel the other woman's hesitation. "I would never write anything derogatory about Ms. Barton's character, Ann," she added gently. "I just want to help uncover the murderer.

Ann sniffed again. "It wasn't anything really. She'd just know when the phone was going to ring sometimes or she'd get hunches about things before they happened. Stuff like that."

Sophia murmured soothingly and then ended the conversation a few minutes later. Sighing, she crossed Ann Perreault off the list and then tackled the next one. James Lemont was an ex-boyfriend of Ariel Woodland, the second victim.

It only took her thirty seconds on the phone with James to realize that there was no love lost between him and the poor, departed Ariel. He certainly wasn't distraught over her death.

"I wasn't surprised when I heard what happened. That girl was just totally whacked at times, if you know what I mean."

Years of dealing with people like James allowed Sophia to hide her distaste for him. She wanted to keep him talking. "No, I'm not sure I know what you mean, Mr. Lemont. Maybe you could explain it to me."

He gave a cruel laugh. "She was always claiming that she had powers, you know. Like some voodoo queen or something. She thought she was something special." He snorted. "Guess being special didn't save her in the end."

Sophia swallowed her anger and her disgust even as a kernel of an idea began to take root in her mind. She asked a few more questions, then brought the conversation with Mr. Lemont to an end and swiftly dialed the next number on her list. Her list of questions grew as she talked to one person after another who had known either Janice Barton or Ariel Woodland. Some people on her list weren't answering their phone, so she made herself do some other work as she waited for time to pass so she could try them again.

Morning drifted into afternoon as she continued to work, managing to write several more articles and send them out to her waiting editors. She resisted the urge to check on Zane every five minutes, only going into the bedroom twice during the long day. She kept trying the numbers on her list until she'd reached just about everyone. It was late afternoon when she finally hung up the phone for the final time. She'd taken what she'd inadvertently uncovered in her first two phone calls and all she'd learned from Laurel Rose about what had happened in Salvation, North Carolina, and played a hunch. None of the families would talk about it, but several of the friends had confirmed that both women were *different*. Some of them had even been adamant that each of the women had had some kind of psychic ability.

"Bingo," she muttered as she made notes on her computer. It seemed that the Dalakis family might have been right in their assessment of who might be targeting their family. Not that it brought them any closer to finding out who the killer might be. It was time to take another tack on the problem.

Grabbing her phone again, she hit her speed dial.

"Cassidy." The male voice barked on the other end of the line.

"What do you know about Jeremiah Stoner?"

He paused. "Other than the fact that he was a psycho killer?"

Sophia scowled. "I'm serious. Did anyone ever check into his personal life, his phone records? Who did he talk to outside of Salvation? Did he have a computer, a journal, anything like that?"

She could almost feel Cassidy's interest perk up. "We didn't look too deep. The man was dead and we didn't want any more questions than necessary. You know something."

It wasn't a question. "Yes. Maybe. I'm not sure." Sighing, she rubbed her tired eyes and leaned back in her chair. "I've been talking to the family and friends of the two victims."

"And?" She could hear the impatience in Cassidy's voice.

"And," she drawled, "I got curious, considering what I've learned from Laurel Rose over the past week."

"Don't make me have to come over there, Sophia," he growled.

Sophia smiled, totally unconcerned by his threat. She had his number and the man was a softie—at least when it came to the women he considered under his protection. And that small, select group now included her. "The families won't confirm anything, you understand, but the friends had some interesting stories to tell."

Silence.

"They were both psychic, Cassidy. At least to some small extent."

"Shit."

"Shit is right. Seems like Stefan and Laurel Rose were on the right track when they thought this was connected to Stoner. The cult he was a member of was all about drinking people's blood to absorb their powers. If these women did have psychic ability, then that's why they were targeted."

"That makes sense. We have to dig into Stoner's past and see if we can't discover who some of his associates were." Cassidy huffed out a breath. "Okay, I'll call the sheriff in Salvation and see if I can't get him to talk. Maybe they came across something in their search for Stoner. Officially, he's still listed as missing."

"They never found his body?" Sophia hadn't realized that.

"And they never will. Not without tearing down the church and digging with a backhoe."

Sophia didn't know whether to be appalled or impressed by the Dalakis brothers. Considering what Stoner had done, she tended to lean toward being impressed. They were good men to have at your back, but definitely not people you wanted as enemies.

"You'll have to be extra vigilant around Laurel Rose and Delight. They're both special and the killer might make a try for them."

Cassidy was already ahead of her. "This place is a fortress during the day and there's no way a human could get past both the men at night. I'm more worried about you and Blythe."

Sophia's stomach clenched and she placed her hand over it. "I don't have any special abilities, so I should be fine. Besides," she hurried on before Cassidy could interrupt her, "the killer had plenty of time to hurt me in the cemetery if that was his aim."

"I still don't like it. You should come over here for the day. I could have a cab come and pick you up."

She smiled in spite of her anxiety. Cassidy was very much like the other men even if he wasn't a vampire. They were all protective, almost to the point of being overbearing. Not that she could blame them in this particular situation. "I'll be fine, and besides, I've got work to do."

"Promise me you'll be extra careful."

"I will," she agreed before she said goodbye and hung up. She'd leave this particular research in Cassidy's capable hands. For now, she'd go down to the police station and badger them for a bit. Hopefully they'd learned something new that might help. The killer might be from the Dalakis brothers' past, but he was in New Orleans now and they had to find him before he took another victim.

Sophia thought about having some lunch, but quickly remembered that there wasn't really that much to choose from. She glanced at her watch and realized it would be more like supper than lunch. The day had flown by and it was only an hour until sundown. A sub sandwich would hit the spot. She'd grab one on her way to talk to Officer Cuthbert and Detective Simpson. She contemplated changing her clothes, but decided that jeans and a T-shirt were good enough.

Closing down her computer, she left her office. She was tempted to check on Zane one final time, but forced herself to turn toward her living room instead. It was kinda freaky to watch him when he wasn't breathing and his heart wasn't beating. She'd leave him a note letting him know that she'd meet him at Lucian's when she was finished at the police station.

A knock interrupted her reverie. She wasn't expecting anyone. Her heart began to pound furiously and she gulped in a mouthful of air. Okay, this was totally ridiculous. It was probably nothing at all.

Still, better to be cautious. She hurried back into her office and grabbed her cell phone before approaching the front door. Hitting the speed dial again, she didn't have long to wait, as it was answered on the first ring.

"Cassidy."

"It's me again. There's someone at my door."

"Don't answer it," Cassidy barked.

There was another knock before she got there, this one slightly harder. Peering out through the peephole, she relaxed when she recognized the delivery uniform from a local office supply shop. "It's a local delivery. Hang on while I talk to him." She undid the locks but kept the chain on. She could hear Cassidy swearing in the background. "Yes."

The man was bald and appeared to be somewhere in his forties. It was hard to tell exactly because his shoulders were slumped forward. He gave her a quick, frazzled smile. "You Sophia Daring?"

Her fingers tightened on the doorknob. She hadn't been expecting this. "Yes," she replied cautiously.

"Good. I gotta delivery."

"I didn't order anything."

The man's pale blue eyes narrowed as he stared at his clipboard. "Says right here it's for Sophia Daring." He rattled off her street number.

"That's me, but I didn't order anything." Now she was totally confused.

The man checked his clipboard again, shuffling papers. "Phone order by a Zane York." The man looked up again, looking perplexed. "It's a great desk chair. Top of the line. The order came in yesterday evening."

Sophia sighed. This sounded like something that Zane would do. Putting the phone back to her ear, she closed the door and undid the chain, ushering the man inside. "It's just a chair that Zane bought for me."

"Sophia." She could hear the panic in Cassidy's voice. "Did Zane tell you he bought you a chair?"

The man wheeled his trolley just inside the door.

"Well, no." Now Cassidy was making her nervous.

"Just need you to sign here, ma'am." The deliveryman held out his clipboard and pen.

"Hang on a second, Cassidy." She laid the phone down on the hutch and reached for the pen and clipboard.

It happened so fast, she didn't have time to respond. The man straightened to his full height and slapped his hand over her mouth as he yanked a hypodermic needle out of his pocket and jammed it into her arm. It hurt and she cried out as she started to fight. But her limbs didn't want to work properly and her head began to spin.

The man held her easily with one arm. He was much stronger than he appeared beneath his baggy uniform. Flipping open the top of the box with his other hand, he then hefted her over his shoulder. It was only then that she realized the box was empty.

"In you go." She tried to stop him, tried to move her body, but it was no use. Her hand flopped out and smacked him in the shoulder. He ignored her as if she were no more than a fly and stuffed her into the box. Before she knew it she was inside and the lid was being closed. She couldn't move, but she could still hear as the man picked up her cell phone.

"Who am I speaking with?" He chuckled and continued. "I rather thought it would be you, Cassidy. I've done quite a bit of research on the Dalakis family." He laughed and the sound sent shivers down Sophia's spine. This man was evil. She swallowed back her fear and continued to listen even as she struggled to get her body to move. "Hmm," he continued after a few moments. "You're in no position to make threats or demands. I know things that your employers wouldn't want made public. Who'd have thought that vampires were real?"

Sophia stilled and thought about Zane, totally vulnerable and helpless under her bed. She didn't think he could wake up during the day. Prayed that he couldn't. As weak as he was earlier, he'd be no match for this man.

"Tell your employers to expect a call from me later this evening." He laughed evilly. "If you want to see Ms. Daring alive again, you'll do exactly what I say. If you don't care, I'll just make her my latest project. I'm sure her blood, while not particularly potent, would be quite sweet."

Sophia's heart stuttered and she forced herself to take deep, slow breaths as she strained to hear what was going on. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't hear Cassidy's voice. A moment later her captor continued. "Now, now, Cassidy. If I were you, I'd be more concerned about that delectable morsel you've been protecting."

Oh, God. This man knew everything about them and they didn't know anything at all about him. She was so screwed.

Sophia.

She blinked as she heard the voice in her head, recognizing it immediately. "Zane," she whispered. Wasn't he supposed to be sleeping?

What's going on? Are you hurt?

She didn't know what to say. How much to tell him.

Sophia! His voice was louder now. Sharper.

He's here. The killer is here. She thought the words, not daring to say them aloud.

The blast of anger hit her like a sledgehammer and her entire body jerked. The box shifted and she realized that the man had hung up the phone and was moving the trolley out through her front door. Suddenly she was falling sideways as the box was tilted back. Her captor hummed a little ditty as he began to lower the trolley down the stairs one at a time.

Sophia! Zane roared.

What! she screamed in her mind. She had bigger problems at the moment. Her body still wouldn't function and her eyes were beginning to get too heavy for her to keep open.

What's going on? Let me see your memories.

She had no idea what he meant by that, but she felt the push in her mind. Knowing it was Zane, she dropped her guard and let him in. She started to doze as she bumped down the stairs and out the front door.

Sophia, stay awake. She wanted to tell him that she was trying, but she didn't have the energy.

She heard the whir of a motor as the trolley was lifted and she was rolled again. A moment later a door slammed. She heard the dull roar of a truck engine and then she felt the movement. She was in the back of a truck being taken God only knew where by a killer.

Zane's roar filled her ears and then there was nothing.

Zane's finger twitched and his eyelids shot open. He knew his green eyes would be tinged red, blazing with barely suppressed fury as he cursed his inability to move. He wanted to yell, but no sound would come from his lips.

He bellowed Sophia's name over and over in his mind, but she was unconscious. He wouldn't even allow himself to think that she might be dead. The man wouldn't have taken her if he meant to kill her right away. Besides, he'd *know* if she were dead. He'd feel it in every cell of his body.

From what little he'd been able to glean from Sophia about what had happened, he knew that the man had spoken to Cassidy. Sophia's captor knew that the Dalakis men were vampires. That wasn't good. It meant they'd been watching them for quite some time now.

Zane didn't know if they knew about him or not. Oh, they knew he was involved with Sophia. Of that he had no doubt. They would have seen her coming and going from Lucian's home with him as her escort. Hopefully, they just thought he was another cop involved in the investigation. That might give him an extra edge.

Sweat rolled down his temples as he tried to reach out to Sophia. But there was nothing. For one bitter moment, he wished he'd converted her. If he had, they'd both be at his home, locked in sleep in a vault that was safer than Fort Knox. Even if she hadn't been with him, he would have been able to find her anywhere. Now, he'd have to hope that she awoke so he could follow the path of her blood link.

And when he found her, there would be hell to pay.

Chapter Twenty-One

Cassidy swore as he tossed the phone on the desk.

"What's wrong?"

He whirled around, gun in his hand. Blythe blinked at him, frozen in place. He glanced down at his weapon. He hadn't even been aware of drawing it, it was so second nature to him.

"Sorry." He holstered his gun and grabbed a file off the desk. The number for the sheriff's office in Salvation had to be in here somewhere.

"What's going on?"

Cassidy's mind was racing, replaying his phone conversation with the killer as he tried to figure out the best course of action. "That was the killer." Cassidy found the number and began dialing. "He has Sophia."

She gasped, her face paling. "Ohmigod."

"We'll get her back," he growled. Any other outcome was unacceptable.

Blythe shook her head. "You don't even know where to begin. Poor Sophia."

"Stop it." He didn't have time for this. "I should have made her stay here." He glared at Blythe.

"It's not your fault," she began, her features softening.

"Of course it is," he began, but broke off when the phone on the other end was answered. "Yes, I'd like to speak with the sheriff if he's in. It's Sam Cassidy from New Orleans." He paused as the speaker continued. "That's right. I was there when all that trouble happened with Laurel Rose. Sure, I'll hold."

He held his hand over the mouthpiece. "After I finish on the phone, I'm going over to Sophia's place to see if I can find anything. Maybe the killer left something behind or someone saw him. It's a long shot, but it's all we've got."

Blythe nodded. She looked lost and afraid and he wanted to wrap his arms around her and just hold her. Last night had been emotional for both of them. He'd wanted to spend the day with her, snuggling and reassuring her that last night didn't matter. They had all the time in the world and he could wait until she was ready to deepen their physical relationship. Whatever had happened in her past didn't matter. Only the future did.

But there had been no time for talking or snuggling. He'd gotten up only an hour after he'd fallen asleep. Blythe had slept until well after lunch, which pleased him. She needed her rest. She was strong in so many ways, but lurking beneath her protective armor was an intelligent, giving woman who made all his senses stand up and take

notice whenever she walked into a room. Cassidy had spent the last week just being around her as much as possible. He figured the more she got used to him being around, the more she'd relax. And it was working. Sort of.

Whether she knew it or not, she'd taken a huge step last night. She'd reached out to him. Yes, she'd pulled back in the end, but Cassidy saw it as progress. Blythe was still skittish, but each day she was becoming less and less so. He kept things light and undemanding and had even managed to coax several smiles out of her. It was ridiculous just how pleased he was with himself when he'd managed to do that. Her shy smile had his cock standing at attention within thirty seconds.

He started to reassure her again, but the sheriff came back on the other line. "This is Sam Cassidy. I was wondering if you have a few minutes to talk about what happened in Salvation last year."

Blythe watched Sam as he talked to the sheriff. He was all business now, ruthless and focused. If anyone could find Sophia and get her back, it was him. She didn't know when she'd started thinking of him as Sam and not Cassidy, but it had become a habit she couldn't break. Cassidy was the cop—watchful, dedicated and hardnosed. Sam, on the other hand, was the man who made her breakfast and laughed at sitcoms on television. Sam was the man who made her heart sing and her body hum. Sam was the man who'd surprised her yet again last night, putting aside his own needs to soothe her.

Uncomfortable with the sensations coursing through her, she turned away and wandered into the kitchen. Spending the past week in his company had challenged her in ways she'd never imagined. All her life she'd thought herself frigid, but around Sam she didn't feel that way. Instead, she felt hot and achy. Even after everything that had happened last night, her body still made no secret of the fact that it was primed and ready for him.

Groaning, she clenched her thighs together and tried to ease the ache growing within her. Never before had her breasts felt so painfully sensitive. Even her bra was uncomfortable as her puckered nipples brushed against the fabric.

Sam was a very handsome man in a rough sort of way. Six feet of hard-packed muscle in jeans and boots, his blue eyes could sparkle with mischief or turn hot with desire. But it was more than his looks that drew her. It was the way he treated her, the way he treated the others. Sam was the kind of man who took his responsibilities seriously.

Right now, she knew he was blaming himself for Sophia's abduction even though it wasn't his fault. He'd all but begged Sophia to stay here during the day, but she'd been adamant that she had to go home to work. Not that Blythe blamed her. She missed her apartment and her old life.

"But that's gone." She scrubbed her hand over her face as she stared out the kitchen window into the private garden. She'd had to quit her singing job because she honestly

didn't know if or when she'd ever be able to sing again. As long as Adrian Prince was searching for her, there was no way she could resume her career. It made her too easy to find.

Deciding she needed to do something, she grabbed the pot from the coffee machine and filled it with water. Sam could probably use a fresh cup of coffee. The man had been running on catnaps and caffeine for days now. As she measured coffee grounds and set the machine running, she allowed the memory of the past week to flow through her mind.

It was odd, but as bad as this past week had been, it had also been one of the best times of her life. She'd lost her home, her job and a local crime boss was after her. That was the worst. But on the other hand, she'd met Sam and all the rest of them. For the first time in her life, she was making female friends. It was strange, but she liked it. Liked them.

The other three women were different from her, but they were all very accepting of her, not pressuring her to reveal anything from her past that she didn't want to. That unconditional acceptance had allowed her to creep out of her shell and meet them partway. Oh, she was still uncomfortable with it, but it was kinda nice to sit and talk and laugh with other women.

"Oh, Sophia." She bit her bottom lip to keep from crying. Brash, brave Sophia in the hands of a killer. It was unthinkable, yet it was all too real. They had been living under a constant threat for days now and the worst had finally happened. She knew that Sam thought he could find Sophia, but Blythe was more realistic. As much as she didn't want to believe it, it was more likely that Sophia would become the third victim of the killer.

She heard Sam's boots on the hardwood floor and swiped her hands over her eyes and sniffed back her tears. It wouldn't do for him to see her crying. He'd get all upset and protective. Her heart beat heavily as he got closer and then she sensed him behind her.

"You all right?" His large hands cupped her shoulders gently as he drew her body back against his.

She nodded. "Fine. Did you find out anything?"

"Not really." He sighed and wrapped his arms around her. She felt surrounded by his heat and strength. They hadn't talked about what had happened between them last night, but Blythe knew it was only a matter of time until Sam forced the issue. "The sheriff didn't know much more than we do. They found the name Spencer and a phone number on a slip of paper in Stoner's house when they searched it. But the phone number is no longer in service and when the sheriff checked, he found out it was for a disposable cell phone that had been paid for in cash. End of lead."

"So that Spencer person could be anyone?"

She sensed him shrug. "Could be a person or a place. Could mean something else altogether. It might not be related to this at all."

"I'm sorry, Sam." She placed her hands over his where they rested on her stomach. He froze behind her and she realized what she'd called him. "I mean, Cassidy."

His arms tightened fractionally around her and he sighed, resting his chin on top of her head. "No, I like it when you call me by my first name."

She asked the question she'd been dying to ask for days now. "Why don't you use it then? Why get everyone to call you Cassidy?"

He moved his chin gently back and forth over the top of her head. She could smell his aftershave, a spicy scent that filled her nostrils. She would forever associate it with Sam. "My parents died when I was just a kid and I grew up in series of orphanages and foster homes. When you're in the system, they use your last name a lot."

Blythe tipped her head to the side and looked up, wanting to see his face. He appeared calm and unconcerned, but she could see an old shadow of sadness lurking in his blue eyes. At least she'd had her mother. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he interrupted before she could go on. "I had a roof over my head and food in my belly. It was fine."

But it hadn't been. She sensed his loneliness, but also knew that he didn't want to talk about it. And besides, now wasn't the time or the place. He leaned down and brushed his mouth against hers. The gentle motion had her lips parting. Her hand crept up to touch his cheek.

Sighing, he pulled back. "You can call me Sam if you want to."

She sensed that this was a big step for him, that he was allowing her to get closer to him than he allowed most people. She was both thrilled and terrified. She wasn't going to be around much longer and both of them would be hurt if their relationship, such as it was, got any deeper.

He stepped away, all business once again. "I have to go." He glanced at his watch. "It's still almost an hour until the sun sets and I can get some help with this. I'm hoping that Zane will be able to track Sophia through their blood connection."

Blythe shivered and rubbed her arms, unconsciously scrunching her neck closer to her body. "Can he do that?"

"Yeah, I think so. Stefan did it when Laurel Rose was abducted. I imagine that Zane has similar skills. As long as he's taken her blood, he should be able to get some kind of a fix on her location." Reaching out, Sam tugged her into his arms and hugged her. "But just in case, I've got to go to Sophia's place and check things out. I won't be gone long and you should be fine as long as you stay here in the main house."

She nodded, her mind spinning. This was the opportunity she'd been waiting for. Going up on her toes, she tugged Sam's head down closer and kissed him. It wasn't a tentative kiss, but a deep, openmouthed one that involved his tongue and hers. Oh, he tasted as fine as dark chocolate and just as smooth.

She lost control of the kiss almost immediately. Sam's hands clasped her around her waist and pulled her closer. Her breasts were squashed against his chest and she

couldn't resist rubbing herself against him. It felt so good, she had to do it again. She whimpered when his hands shifted lower, cupping her behind and pressing her pelvis against his. The hard ridge of his erection pressed against her mound and she moaned. No, she didn't feel cold or frigid around this man. She felt hot and wanton and totally unlike herself.

Fear, hard and strong, shot through her and she pulled away, gasping for breath. Sam was in no better condition than she was. His blue eyes were hooded as he stared at her. His lips were moist from their kiss and his hair was tousled where she'd shoved her fingers through it. She stepped back, appalled at her actions.

"I'm sorry." She straightened her shirt and stared down at the tops of her sneakers. She wasn't truly sorry. She was saying goodbye, but he didn't know that.

"I'm not." His husky whisper made her shiver as he caught her chin with his finger and tilted her face upward. "When this is over, we have to talk."

Her stomach did a flip-flop and she shuddered. She didn't say yes or no, but he seemed to take it as an assent. He dropped a quick kiss on her lips and then whirled away, heading toward the back door. "I'll be back as quick as I can, but if something happens and I don't get back before the family gets up, fill them in on what's happened. They can reach me on my cell phone."

Then he was gone. She stood there listening to the sound of his car starting. When the sound disappeared into the distance, she touched her lips. They still tingled from where he'd kissed her.

Shaking off the sensual lethargy that had settled over her, she decided it was time for her to take action. Her life as she knew it was over and it was time to start a new one before she got in over her head with Sam.

She let herself out of the house, careful to make sure both the locks and the alarms were set. There were several alarms, one that went to a private security company, one that went to Sam's apartment, one that signaled Stefan's house next door and a final one that alerted Lucian and Delight. She was certainly safer here than she was anywhere else, but she had to go.

Last night had proved to her that she couldn't give Sam the kind of relationship that he wanted, needed and deserved. It would be better for everyone involved if she just slipped quietly away. She ignored the taunting voice in her head that called her a coward. Maybe she was being a coward, but right now she knew that this was what she had to do.

Hurrying to Sam's, she let herself in and grabbed her purse. She stared at her tote bags, but decided against taking her clothing. If she was going to run, she needed to be unencumbered. Taking the tattered journal out from under the mattress where she'd hidden it, she tucked it in her purse and then slung the strap over her head and shoulder, keeping her arms free.

Sam had enough problems in his life without adding hers to the mix. She hesitated, staring at the bed she'd slept in since he brought her here. It was his bed and her only

regret was that she hadn't truly shared it with him. Now she'd never have the opportunity. "Not that we ever truly had a chance." She reached out and touched his pillow one final time. Jethro Prince had ruined any chance of her ever having a normal relationship. Blythe didn't want Sam to ever find out what had happened to her. What she'd done.

She shuddered and broke out into a cold sweat. Turning away from the bed, she hurried to the kitchen. She couldn't just leave him without saying something. Grabbing the pad of paper by the phone, she jotted a quick note thanking him for everything. It didn't say nearly enough, but it was the best she could do.

He'd forget about her within a few weeks. She, on the other hand, would remember him forever. His scent, his taste and his touch would haunt her for the rest of her life. Shoving the note next to the phone where he'd be sure to see it, she took one last long look around the room and then forced herself to leave.

It was harder than she'd anticipated, locking her key inside his apartment, going down the steps one at a time and finally resetting the alarm. She didn't go out the front way, but ducked out a side gate that was all but covered by foliage.

She didn't look back as she made her way down the sidewalk even though her heart felt as if it were breaking. "You're doing the right thing." The short pep talk didn't help much.

Blythe sorted out what she had to do. The bank was first. She needed to get her money and close out her accounts. It wasn't much, but it would get her out of New Orleans and give her a fresh start somewhere else.

The farther away she got from Sam's home, the harder it got to put one foot in front of the other. She worried about Sophia and prayed that Sam, Zane and the others would find her in time. She'd have to keep a watch on the papers to find out. What would Delight and Laurel Rose think of her, leaving at a time like this and with no word at all? They would be hurt and probably be angry with her. Blythe rubbed at her breastbone, trying to ease the ache, but it didn't help. Nothing would.

Then there was Stefan and Lucian. They would both be angry with her for leaving. For some crazy reason, they felt responsible for her. She squared her shoulders and lengthened her stride, ignoring the heavy feeling in her heart. She was no one's responsibility. She could take care of herself.

That left Sam, who she really didn't want to think about. He would be furious with her, but more than that, he would be hurt. That was the last thing she wanted to do, but there was really no other choice. *Wasn't there?* a voice in her head whispered.

She ignored it. What was her other choice? Tell Sam about everything that had happened to her. She shuddered as she imagined how that would go. "Oh, by the way, I was Jethro Prince's sex slave for a year." Her stomach churned. Sam would *certainly* want her then. Not.

That was her real motivation for running. She couldn't bear to see the tenderness and sensual heat in Sam's eyes turn to cold disgust. And what else could he be but

disgusted? She was sickened herself by what had happened, what she'd been forced to do. If it had only been herself... She broke off, refusing to think of what might have been. She'd done what she'd had to do to protect her mother. What was done was done.

But what if it didn't matter to him? What if Sam could deal with what had happened? She wished that voice in the back of her head would shut up. What man would want her, knowing what she'd done? *Sam might.*

"Oh, get real," she muttered, trying to drown out the voice in her head. But still the seed of doubt had been planted. Could she take the chance? What did she really have to lose? As it was, she was looking at being alone for the rest of her life. If she left, she'd never have the chance to see if her life could have been different.

The bank was just ahead of her now. All she had to do was get her money, go to the bus station and within the hour, she'd be on her way to somewhere else. She had no idea where. She'd leave that decision to fate. Whichever bus was leaving first was the one she'd be on.

It didn't take her long to close her account and get her money. She separated it into several different piles, tucking some in her purse, her jacket pocket and in her jeans as a precaution.

She stepped out into the late afternoon sun and hesitated. Right would take her back to Sam and left would take her to the bus station. She looked both ways, took a deep breath and turned...

"Hello there, Blythe."

She whirled around and faced a hard-looking man who appeared vaguely familiar. She turned to run back into the bank, but he slapped his hand over her mouth and shoved her into the backseat of a dark sedan that pulled up beside them. It was all over in a matter of seconds and she was sandwiched between him and another man.

She tried to fight, but the man holding her twisted her arm behind her, jerking it so high she was surprised it didn't snap. "You made a laughingstock out of us the last time," he growled in her ear as he increased the pressure. "I don't know what you did to us, but the boss wasn't pleased when we turned up at the club without you and with no memory of what happened." The pain was excruciating. As the car whizzed away, he released his hand from her mouth. That was when she realized who they were—the two men from her apartment.

The younger man gripped his fingers in her cheeks so hard she knew she'd have bruises. "You remember us, don't you, Blythe? I'm Tom and that's Harold beside you." Her eyes went to the older man who stared back at her with pure hate in his eyes. Tom continued, his tone almost conversational. "You remember Harold. Somehow he ended up with a bullet graze in his shoulder. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

She didn't even try to speak. She was smart enough to know there was nothing she could say that would make them release her.

"We've been watching for you," Tom continued. "Figured that you'd come out eventually. Imagine our surprise when we caught a glimpse of you in the yard at the Dalakis' home. That ex-cop has been keeping a close eye on you. Just how close has he been watching you, Blythe? I heard that you're a hot little cunt." He laughed as he leaned closer. "The boss is waiting to talk to you and he doesn't like to be kept waiting." Tom licked the side of her face. "Maybe he'll let us have what's left of you when he's finished." He groped at her breast, squeezing it painfully as he laughed again. "Just consider it payback."

Blythe thought she might be sick as fear beat at her brain. She closed her eyes to shut out the sight of the man in front of her. She'd been abducted. The time of reckoning with Adrian Prince was at hand.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Zane came awake with a roar. The bed went flying as he tossed it aside and surged to his feet. Without hesitation, he made his way into the living room. With his preternatural senses, he sniffed the air, filling his nostrils with the smells of the room.

Sophia's delicate scent of vanilla and feminine warmth was overshadowed by the sharp tang of fear. The male's smell was different. There was no fear, just a tinge of excitement and a whiff of expensive cologne. He also caught the essence of someone else. Cassidy. Cassidy had been here and gone.

Hurrying out through the front door, he left the apartment behind him. He wouldn't be coming back without Sophia. Right now, he had to get to Lucian's place and find out what Cassidy knew.

While he raced across the city, blurring his passage from the minds of all he passed, he kept calling out to Sophia with his mind. She didn't answer. No matter. He would find her wherever she was, but it would take time and that was something they didn't have. Even now, the killer could be draining the lifeblood from her.

He could feel his eyes changing, glowing a burning red. His fangs lengthened, his muscles tightened. Whoever had taken her would pay with his life.

Charging up the front steps, Zane mentally undid all the locks on the door before barging inside. Stefan met him before he had taken two steps inside. The other man took one look at his face and beckoned him forward.

Zane stalked toward the library, sensing that everyone else had already assembled. Well, not everyone. Sophia was missing. And, surprisingly, so was Blythe.

Fury was pouring off Cassidy in waves as Zane entered the room. All eyes flew to him and back to Cassidy. "What do you know?" Zane wasted no time on pleasantries.

Cassidy turned to him, blue eyes icy with anger. "The killer has Sophia. Tricked her into letting him inside by saying he had a delivery from you. He popped her into the box and took her away. Neighbors remember a delivery van and I got a partial license number. The van was stolen from a local company early this morning and found abandoned late this afternoon. No prints, no nothing."

Zane swallowed back his growing fear. Instinctively, he reached out with his mind but found nothing.

"You will find her." Stefan stepped forward, laying his hand on Zane's shoulder. "We will find her."

Zane looked around the room and for the first time since he was a small boy, he had a sense of family. A sense of belonging. But none of it mattered, not without Sophia. He could feel an underlying panic in Cassidy along with his anger. "Where's Blythe?"

"We don't know." Delight glanced at Cassidy who turned away and walked to the window to stare out into the night. "She left while Cassidy was over at Sophia's. She left behind all her belongings as well as a note saying that she had to leave."

"This is all my fault." Cassidy faced them all. "I knew she was still nervous. Uncertain. Especially after last night..." He broke off and heaved a sigh, leaving them all wondering what had happened between the two of them. "I knew there was a possibility that she'd run. I should never have left her alone." He walked toward Zane, his blue eyes steady. "I should have insisted that Sophia stay here. None of this would have happened if I had."

Zane stared at the other man, sensing his bone-deep remorse. He shook his head. "Sophia has a mind of her own. She knew the risks and took them. The blame belongs on the killer and no one else." He paused, not quite sure if he should say anything about Blythe, but decided that Cassidy deserved to know. "Blythe ran because she's frightened of what she feels for you." With his preternatural abilities, he'd picked up that much from her over the past week and figured the others had too. He glanced at the other vampires in the room, who all nodded. "She has a secret, one that she's hidden even from us, but it's big and she's afraid that if you know you will turn from her."

Cassidy dragged his fingers through his hair. "That's crazy."

"No." Laurel Rose laid her hand on Cassidy's arm, her eyes dark and filled with mystery. "That is all too human. She's afraid and not thinking properly or she would never have risked her safety."

"Okay." As much as Zane was worried about Blythe, right now Sophia's safety was paramount. "I'm going out to search for Sophia."

"I'll go with you." Stefan stood with his hands on his hips as if daring Zane to disagree with him. He was many things, but he wasn't stupid enough to turn down help. Not when Sophia's life was at stake.

The shrill ring of the phone filled the room. Lucian lunged for the phone, putting it on speaker before answering. "Dalakis." His voice was level, but vibrated with barely suppressed anger.

"I have something you want." The voice was cool. Clipped. "Or maybe you don't want it at all." He laughed and a woman screamed in pain.

"Blythe!" Cassidy jumped toward the phone. "If you hurt her, you bastard..." Stefan grabbed him from behind, restraining him easily with his preternatural strength.

More laughter. "I assume that is former New Orleans Police detective, Sam Cassidy. My men commented on how smitten you seemed to be with Blythe. But then, so many men are."

"What do you want, Prince?" Lucian took control of the conversation. "I assume that I am speaking with Adrian Prince. You and your brother are much alike, I see. Both cowards who prey on women because you are afraid to face real men."

The silence on the other end was deafening. They all flinched as another scream filled the air. "She will pay for that, Dalakis, and I will enjoy every moment of it."

"Don't you hurt her." Cassidy jerked out of Stefan's grasp, his hands fisted by his sides.

"That is up to your employer, Cassidy. I want him, not her. If he turns himself over to me then, of course, I will let Ms. Nixon go free." He paused. "If not, well, it will be a long and enjoyable night...for me." The line went dead.

Cassidy whirled around, heading out of the room. Standing near the door, Delight reached out and placed her hand on his chest, stopping him. "Wait."

He pushed past her. "I'm not waiting for anyone." He withdrew his gun, checking it before shoving it back in his shoulder holster.

"Cassidy." He stopped but didn't turn around as Lucian spoke. "You need help." Lucian turned to his brother. "You and Zane go and find Sophia." He glanced at Zane, his green eyes blazing. "Use your blood link with her. Stefan will help you. Cassidy and I will go and get Blythe back."

"You don't know where she is." Delight went to her husband, her face filled with worry and anger.

"My love." He reached out and brushed his hand over her face. "Adrian Prince is as arrogant as his brother. He will have her at his club. He thinks he is invincible in his stronghold with his men surrounding him."

"I'm going with you." Delight endured her husband's scowl without flinching. "Sophia is my friend too. I'm not a helpless human anymore. I can help."

One corner of Lucian's mouth turned upward. "You were never helpless, my love. Not even when you were human."

"That's settled then." Laurel Rose stepped forward. "Delight will go with you and I'll go with Stefan and Zane."

They all felt Stefan's blast of anger as he faced his wife. The very air around them seemed to ripple with emotion. "You will stay here." Each word was spoken slowly, his fury barely contained.

Laurel Rose shook her head. "I have a score to settle with these people. I am going with or without you."

Stefan practically vibrated with anger, but his wife seemed totally unconcerned. Zane didn't know whether to admire these women or to have them committed. It struck him then that Sophia was very much like them—brave and loyal. He wanted what his cousins had. He wanted a woman to stand by his side for eternity.

For him, there was only one woman. Sophia.

His head jerked up and he blocked out all the noise in the room, concentrating on the slight ripple in his mind. *Sophia!* He called her name and waited. There. Barely a whisper, but he heard it all the same. He grabbed on to the mental connection with a stranglehold. There was no way he'd lose her now.

"I've got her." He stalked toward the door, a hunter on the scent of his prey. He sensed Stefan and his wife falling in behind him as he practically flew out the door and into the night.

My head hurts. That was Sophia's first thought as she came awake. That and the fact that she ached all over. She tried to open her eyes but they felt so heavy that she stopped after a couple of attempts. Her mouth was dry and felt as if it had been stuffed with cotton. She groaned as she tried to move and found she couldn't.

"Ah, so you're finally awake. I fear I misjudged the dose of the drug I gave you. You're skinnier than I thought."

It all came flooding back to her. The delivery man. The prick in her arm. The box. Oh God. She'd been drugged and kidnapped by the killer. She tried to move again and this time she heard the clink of metal. Finally forcing her eyes open, she tilted her head back and looked upward. She was leaning against a wall, held up only by her hands, which were shackled over her head. Little wonder her arms hurt. The metal cuffs dug into her wrists, making them bleed. She wondered how long she'd been here.

She heard a shuffling sound off to her right and turned to look. The throbbing in her head increased tenfold. She closed her eyes and bit her lip to drive back another groan of pain. She shivered as a cold breeze hit her. She was naked.

A hard male hand cupped her chin and she pried her eyes open again and stared at her captor. Gone was the hunched-over deliveryman. In his place was a tall, strong man with a shaved head and eyes that glittered like amber. He looked to be in his late thirties. A man in the prime of his life.

"Why?" She tried to say more but her mouth just wasn't working properly.

"Why?" He dug his fingers into her cheeks as he leaned down until their noses were almost touching. "You are a means to an end." He gently kissed her forehead before releasing her. She shuddered and he laughed.

"You have no psychic power, so your blood is of little value, at least to me." He allowed his hand to caress her neck, his fingers wrapping around it. "You were useful in drawing the Dalakis family out, although not in quite the way I had envisioned. I expected you to turn the evidence I'd planted over to the police and write your articles about the Dalakis brothers being suspected murderers." He sighed dramatically. "But no matter. Your worth now lies in the fact that the Dalakis family seems to consider you a friend." His fingers tightened, squeezing harder each second. Sophia felt her eyes bulge as she struggled to get free. Black spots appeared before her.

He released her from his grip suddenly and she gasped for air. It hurt to breathe. Her neck felt swollen. "You're wrong," she managed to croak.

He backhanded her. The attack was so quick that she didn't even see it coming. Her head bounced off the stone wall behind her and she slumped. The cuffs around her wrists bit into her flesh and she forced her legs to straighten, leaning all her weight against the cold, rough concrete.

"Let's hope for your sake that I'm not. I want Stefan Dalakis and his wife, Laurel Rose. They caused the death of a good friend of mine. A brother in spirit if not in blood. Although we shared enough blood to be considered brothers."

"You're sick," she spat. She could see the amusement in his eyes and realized that the bastard was enjoying himself. Without the baggy uniform, she could see that he was all compact muscle. Even if she got free, it wouldn't be easy to escape from him. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, refusing to give in to despair. Zane would come for her.

Just thinking of him made her feel better. Stronger. They had a blood tie now. He'd taken her blood and given her some of his. For the first time since she'd found out that he'd forced her to drink some of his blood, she was glad for it. She'd use that connection to try to reach him.

Focusing her scattered thoughts, she reached out with her mind. *Zane! Are you there?* Nothing. She tried harder, blocking out the man standing in front of her and the fact that she was cold and naked and at his mercy. She ignored the metal cuffs digging into her wrists and the drips of blood that rolled down her arms.

Zane!

Nothing.

"Are you calling for your lover?" He smirked, leaning so close she could feel his fetid breath on her face. "He can't hear you. Not now." He skimmed his thumb over the curve of her jaw and she held her breath, not moving a muscle. "I've been watching all of you and I know what he is. What they all are." He laughed as he took a step back. Sophia gave a brief sigh of relief. "They think they are so clever, but they are not the only ones with special skills. Your lover, indeed, any of them, will not hear your mental cries for help unless I allow it."

Her captor reached out and cupped her breast. She jerked away, but there was nowhere for her to go. Her back hit the wall as he pinched her nipple tight. "Not much to look at, are you?" he taunted. "No matter." He released her breast and trailed his fingers down her stomach. She twisted away and tried to kick out at him, but the attempt put her off balance and she stumbled.

She could feel his breath on her once again as he leaned closer. She turned her head away, but it wasn't her face he was after. His tongue traced down her arm, licking at the rivulet of blood that was flowing from her wrist. She shuddered and her stomach roiled. He shoved his hand between her thighs and fingered her. She closed her eyes, withdrawing deep inside herself.

He laughed as he pulled away. "Tasty. Better than I anticipated."

"You're insane," she spat, glaring at him.

He shook his head, seemingly more amused than angry. "No, Ms. Daring. What I am is more knowledgeable than most people. There is power in the blood and I think that your friends, the Dalakis family, are well aware of that." He licked his lips, flicking off a bead of red. "As I'm sure that you are aware."

A shiver went down her spine. She felt chilled to the very marrow of her bones. "Who are you?" She had to keep him talking. Zane was on his way and he would help her.

The man smiled. "I was wondering when you'd get around to that. You can call me Spencer. You're a good reporter, Sophia. I had hoped that you'd take the clues I left you and see that justice was done." He shook his head as if chastising a small child. "But you didn't. Instead, you protected the Dalakis family. They killed Stoner and disrupted my network of informants that I have scattered around the country. For that, they must pay. You could have had it all. Breaking a story like this would have assured your reputation for life."

"Some things are more important. Like the truth."

His hand snapped out again, striking the left side of her face. She cried out as she bit her lip, splitting the skin.

"The truth." He leaned so close she could feel his breath on her face. "The truth is that they have to pay. The truth is that Jeremiah Stoner was right. Laurel Rose's blood is potent. And now that I know the truth about them, I will have their blood. Vampire! I haven't had vampire blood in years."

Shock held her immobile. He believed in vampires. Knew that they truly existed. She didn't know where she found the courage to keep talking to him, but she knew she had to if she were to have a chance at surviving this. "You truly believe in vampires?"

He caught her face in his hand and tilted her head up. Bending down, he licked the blood from her lip, sucking it into his mouth. She struggled, kicking out one of her bare feet. He smiled as he nibbled her lip, then released it. He whispered in her ear. "Of course I do. And the members of my little cult are instrumental in keeping me informed when they suspect they might have come across one. Stoner was so excited when he called and told me about Stefan Dalakis. He suspected that Dalakis had power—he just had no idea how much. Pity I hadn't gotten there before Dalakis and his brothers dispatched Stoner."

Sophia dug her fingers into the chain holding her upward to keep from screaming. She hurt everywhere and was shivering with a combination of fear and cold, but she didn't want him to know it. "Why? Why do you believe?" She sensed his need to talk, to glory in his actions.

He smiled, his long, white fangs gleaming in the candlelight. "Because, Ms. Daring. I am one."

Her breath caught in her throat, almost choking her. Impossible! "But you were out in the daylight." This was almost too much for her to comprehend.

He laughed and it wasn't a pleasant sound. "Not impossible when you consider that I started life as a human embryo. You see, my mother was pregnant with me when her vampire mate discovered her. He converted her, not caring if I lived or died. I lived, but my mother's conversion changed me as well. Perhaps because I was partly formed, but not fully when she was changed. We'll never know for sure." He caught her chin in

a tight grip, squeezing her cheeks. "Make no mistake. I am a vampire. But I am a hybrid of sorts, able to stay out almost an hour past dawn and move around outside an hour before sunset. It makes life much easier, I find."

Releasing his hold on her, he sauntered to the other side of the room. Sophia's mind was whirling with the implications. A hybrid vampire! She shook her head, desperately trying to clear it. She had to get her bearings, had to figure out some way of escaping. If what he'd said was true, and she had little reason to doubt him, then help wasn't coming anytime soon. She was well and truly on her own.

Only a dim lantern lit the space, but Sophia felt they were in a shed of some kind. She looked around the walls and realized the space wasn't all that big. Her captor had set up some of his things on a long table. She squinted to see better and froze as horror spread through her limbs. That wasn't a table. That was a coffin. Her breathing became quicker and more swallow as she realized where she was.

A mausoleum. Oh God. They were in a cemetery in a crypt.

She screamed. It bounced off the walls and came back at her. Spencer whirled around, his eyes glowing with pleasure. "You just figured it out, did you? You can scream all you like. There is no one around to hear you and the walls are quite thick."

He ambled toward her with a silver dagger in one hand and a chalice in the other. "Your blood leaves a lovely aftertaste. I thought I'd enjoy a glass while we talk further."

Sophia tugged at the restraints. She didn't waste her time screaming out loud, but turned inward, calling out to Zane. Maybe if she could break her captor's concentration, he wouldn't be able to block her mental messages to Zane. He dragged the flat side of the blade over the curve of her breast. "Leave me alone!" she cried, kicking out at him.

"I can't do that, Sophia. You had your choice and you made it. Unfortunately, you didn't choose wisely. But then, humans seldom do." He shifted the blade upward over the underside of her arm and pushed inward. She hissed as she felt the knife slice her skin and the blood began to flow down her arm, into the chalice he pressed against her.

Laurel Rose canted her head to one side and listened. "Did you hear that?" Both men stopped and stared at her, shaking their heads.

Frustration rolled off Zane in waves, but Laurel Rose ignored it, focusing her powers. "There it is again."

Stefan shook his head. "I hear nothing."

"We're wasting time." Zane started moving swiftly down the back alley. They were searching the section of town where both murdered women had lived. It seemed the mostly likely place to start. In truth, it was the only place they knew to look.

Stefan shook his head and started after his cousin, but she didn't move. Sometimes these men forgot that she was psychic before she'd ever become a vampire and that the conversion had only heightened her skills. Taking a deep breath, she relaxed her mind and listened, picturing Sophia.

Zane! Laurel Rose heard the scream in her mind as if Sophia were standing alongside her. Whirling around, she sped toward the cemetery, yelling out to her husband in her mind as she ran. Stefan and Zane were quite a distance away, but Laurel Rose couldn't wait for them. Sophia was in immediate danger. She could feel the other woman's fear. She could also feel the fact that Sophia was weakening.

Pushing herself even harder, Laurel Rose entered the cemetery. She knew exactly where to find them.

The air in the chamber thickened. The lantern flickered, almost extinguishing before flaring upward. Her captor whirled away from her as the wall began to vibrate. Sophia could swear she could see the wall pulsing. The door to the mausoleum was slammed back against the wall before bouncing shut.

"Dalakis, is that you?" Excitement tinged his voice as he turned back to her, grabbing her by the neck and placing the knife against it.

"Yes, but perhaps not the one you were waiting for." Laurel Rose stepped into the light. She stared at the man holding Sophia by the neck, studying him. "Your name is Spencer, but you've had many others."

He tilted his head toward her, conceding her the point. "You are very skilled, my dear. Even more so than Jeremiah Stoner ever imagined. I have had many names over the past one hundred years."

"You're also like us, yet not like us."

"You are indeed very astute. As I explained to Ms. Daring, I was already a babe in my mother's stomach when she was converted. As a result, I have a few special abilities that the rest of you don't have."

"I imagine that there are some...deficiencies as well."

"Touché, my dear."

As she listened to the conversation with half an ear, Sophia wondered what Laurel Rose was doing here on her own. Where the heck was Stefan? And, more importantly, where was Zane? She kept still, not wanting to bring Spencer's attention back to her. Laurel Rose was doing her best to keep him occupied. Maybe too good a job.

Dropping his hand from her neck, he took a step toward Laurel Rose. "I imagine that your blood would be absolutely delectable."

"Stoner thought so too."

Sophia watched as Spencer moved closer. "Run, Laurel Rose," she yelled. She didn't want the other woman to face this madman on her own.

But Laurel Rose didn't run. Instead she braced herself for his attack. Spencer smiled as he released the knife from his hand in a blur of motion. Laurel Rose dodged at the very last second, but she still wasn't quick enough. The blade lodged in her shoulder and the impact sent her reeling against the wall. She yanked out the bloody knife and lunged at Spencer with it. He struck her arm, sending her weapon clattering to the floor.

"Stop it!" Sophia screamed at Spencer as she tugged at the metal cuffs holding her captive. Blood coated her wrists, making them slippery. She yanked harder as Spencer flew at Laurel Rose, grabbing her by the shoulders.

Laurel Rose fought back, catching him in the face with a sharp right hook. He howled but didn't let go of her. Instead, his fingers dug into her shoulders so hard he drew blood.

Sophia ignored the pain encompassing her entire body. She had to help Laurel Rose. She had to get free. Sucking in a deep breath, she gave one mighty yank. One of her hands slipped free of the metal cuffs. She'd left blood and flesh behind, but at least one of her hands was free. Grabbing the short iron chain that held the manacle to the stone wall, she pulled with both hands. The ancient stone began to crumble. She could hear the grunts and sounds of fighting behind her, but didn't pause to look. She needed to be free!

Digging deep within her, she found the strength to pull again. This time she gave a mighty yell as she yanked the chain. The chain held, but the moorings broke away from the wall of the old mausoleum. Sophia fell backward and hit the hard floor with a bang. Her vision blurred but she ignored it as she dragged herself to her feet. Spencer was bending closer to Laurel Rose's neck, his fangs bared. Sophia didn't hesitate. Taking a running leap, she jumped on his back, wrapped her arm around his neck and hauled it back with all her might.

He growled and cursed, releasing his hold on Laurel Rose. Reaching around, he pulled her off his back, swatting her aside as if she was nothing more than a pesky gnat. Sophia landed on the hard stone floor with a thump that knocked the wind out of her. As she lay there, Spencer turned back to Laurel Rose. The other woman was dirty, her clothing torn and bloody, her breath coming in hard gasps.

The door of the crypt slammed inward. Sophia covered her head as debris fell around her. Stefan leapt through the door and positioned himself in front of Laurel Rose.

Spencer grabbed a knife from on top of the coffin and yanked Sophia into his arms, holding the knife to her throat. It happened so fast, she hadn't seen it coming, hadn't been able to stop it.

Sophia blinked, and as she did, Zane seemed to materialize in front of them. Sophia had never seen a more welcome sight in her life. His eyes devoured her in one quick sweep and then he was focused totally on the man holding her captive.

Sophia sensed Spencer's growing anticipation as he shoved the blade tighter to her throat, but it was now tinged with fear. Blood trickled as the sharp blade pricked her skin. Sophia was afraid to move.

"This is wonderful." She almost felt sorry for him. Almost. He had no idea what he was up against. He might be a vampire, but he was no match for both Zane and Stefan.

"If you want her to live, you'll chain yourself to the wall." Sophia hadn't noticed that there was more than one set of chains hammered into the stone.

"Why would I do that, Spencer?" Zane cocked his head and stared at the man. "It is Spencer, isn't it?"

He nodded.

"He's just as crazy as Jeremiah Stoner was. More so, really. He's a vampire as well, a hybrid one with special powers. He thinks that makes him better than everyone else." This from Laurel Rose, who took a step forward. "He likes to prey on the weak. It makes him feel strong. But in reality, he's the weak one," she taunted.

"You're the one Stoner wanted though, aren't you? Laurel Rose." The knife pressed deeper against Sophia's throat and she could feel the warm dribble of blood down her neck. "I want your blood. The taste. The power. And I will have it." He licked his lips.

"Enough." The word was barely a whisper, but it echoed like a yell. Zane stared at Spencer, his green eyes blazing. As she watched they turned to red, like flames leaping to life within him. His fangs lengthened. "I will tell you the same thing that Stefan told Stoner. There is power in the blood, but you have no idea just how much."

As if by some giant unseen hand, Spencer was ripped away from Sophia and thrown against the wall. Both she and the blade fell to the floor. He jerked but didn't fall, held upright by Zane's force of will. The hair on the back of Sophia's neck rose as she witnessed Zane's power in action. It was incredible and terrifying at the same time. If he ever chose to use his abilities for evil rather than good, no one would be safe.

"Blood will be spilled." Zane walked slowly forward, his eyes never leaving the man. "But it will be yours."

"Perhaps." Spencer broke away from Zane's mental hold and threw a mental blast of his own at Zane. As Sophia watched, Zane flew to one side, hitting the wall so hard that some of the stone crumbled and fell to the floor.

With a mighty roar, Spencer flew at Zane, who met him partway. The two of them collided with deadly force. They grappled, teeth bared, eyes flashing red. Stefan was off to one side with Laurel Rose, attending to his wife's wounds. Sophia knew it was up to her to help Zane.

Although there wasn't one spot on her body that didn't ache, she dragged herself up, doing her best to avoid the two men as they battled. She cringed as the coffin was knocked off its pedestal and crashed to the floor. Sophia took a second to be grateful that the lid had stayed shut. She looked around for something she could use to help. Anything.

A flash on the ground caught her attention. Spencer's knife. Grabbing it, she held it in her hand, but the handle was quickly soaked in the blood that covered her palms. Sweat dripped into her eyes and she swiped it with the back of her hand.

Zane's hands were locked around the other man's throat, choking him. Sophia wasn't sure that would do much good. She remembered what Zane had told her. Sunlight, beheading and a stake in the heart. She didn't have a stake, but she did have a knife. Waiting, she watched for her opportunity and when Spencer's back was to her,

she leapt forward and jammed her knife in his back. She hoped the blade was long enough to reach his heart.

Spencer jerked back, his eyes widening with fear as he whirled to face her. Then he jerked again. Sophia could see that Zane had pulled the knife from Spencer's back and now had it in his hand. Without hesitation, he plunged the blade directly into Spencer's chest, using his preternatural strength to drive it deep into his heart. Spit flew from Spencer's lips as he struggled to remove the knife, but Zane held on tight.

"It's time to pay for your crimes." Zane pushed harder. Blood spurted everywhere, soaking the ground around them. Sophia couldn't move as she watched Spencer drop to the floor. She didn't know how long it took until his limbs stopped flailing. Finally he was still. It was done.

"Not quite done," she whispered, knowing she still had a part to play in all of this.

Zane whirled to face her, his eyes blazing, teeth bared, but Sophia wasn't afraid. His chest rose and fell with anger as his eyes fell on her throbbing neck. "He hurt you."

He said it as if that justified his actions and, she supposed, in his mind it did. But even though Spencer was dead, her job here wasn't done. "I promised Janice Barton that I'd get her justice. I owe her and Ariel Woodland and their families."

Zane glared at her and then back at Spencer, who was still lying on the floor as blood seeped out of him. Ignoring the man, Zane stalked toward her and she shivered as his anger struck her full force. She closed her eyes and swallowed hard. As angry as he was, his hands were gentle as they pulled her toward him. His strong arms came around her, lifting her carefully.

Reaching out, she touched the hard planes of his face. "I have to call the police and let them know about Spencer. I need to do this."

Red tinged his eyes and she could sense the maelstrom of emotion swirling within him as he fought it back. "I don't like this."

"I know." She rubbed his chest, trying to calm him. She sensed Stefan and Laurel Rose hovering quietly in the background. "You all have to leave."

Zane's arms tightened around her. "No."

"Yes," she whispered. "You can't be found here when the police arrive. There are too many questions that you can't afford to have asked. Plus there's the whole deal about being taken in for questioning. How would we even explain your presence here? Besides, there are more members in this sick cult and they need to be stopped once and for all." Sophia willed Zane to understand.

Laurel Rose tucked a lock of hair over her shoulder, winced and sighed. "I only wish I'd thought of that when Stoner had me."

"My love. You were too near death to think about anything. And I was much too angry." Stefan wrapped his arms tenderly around his wife and pulled her against him. Laurel Rose's clothing was torn and her face was dirty, but already she was beginning to heal.

Sophia blinked back tears. There was so much love between them it was almost painful to watch. She owed Laurel Rose her life. If not for the other woman, she'd probably have been dead before Zane arrived. "Okay. We need to get this done."

"I'm not leaving you." His voice was cool, his green eyes even colder. She knew that he wasn't happy with her and he was about to get even angrier.

"You have to go now."

He shook his head. "I will wait until the police arrive and then I will go." She started to protest, but he overrode her concerns. "They will not see me."

Sophia nodded and glanced toward Stefan and his wife. Laurel Rose offered her a smile of encouragement. "We'll leave you two now, but we will see you again soon." Stefan gave her a formal bow and then they were gone, leaving just her and Zane with Spencer.

"You have to stay away until this is over. All of you do."

"That is unacceptable." There was no mistaking Zane's rage. The room went icy cold and her shivering increased.

"You don't have a choice," she managed to get out in between the chattering of her teeth. "You have to promise me that you'll keep the others away too. It's better that way. Safer for everyone."

Zane swore and let go of her long enough to strip off his coat and wrap it around her. Then she was back in his arms. The warmth from his coat immediately made her feel better, but she didn't know if she'd ever truly feel warm again. "It is you who doesn't have a choice. This is not negotiable."

Sophia knew this was going to hurt Zane, but she didn't have a choice. She had to protect him, no matter the cost to herself. "I don't want you here."

His arms were still around her, but she could sense his withdrawal. It was what she wanted, but still it hurt her in ways that her physical pain never could. "I will still watch out for you."

The man could teach stubborn to a mule. "I don't want you watching out for me. I got along just fine before you came along." God, she wanted this over with before she broke down and started bawling like a baby. "Look, the investigation will take weeks even with Spencer dead. I'll be interviewed and examined, my life put under a microscope until the justice system is satisfied I've told them everything I know. I don't need you around for that. It would only put all of you in danger and make things harder."

"Well, I wouldn't want to make things harder for you." He lowered her legs to the ground. She wanted to crawl back into his arms, wrap her legs around him and never let him go.

"Maybe when things settle down..." She didn't quite know how to ask him to come back to her when this was over.

"No. You're right. It's better this way. A quick break rather than a long drawn-out affair."

Even though she'd been expecting it, his words beat at her. She glanced down at her chest, surprised that her heart wasn't bleeding. She only wanted to protect him, not drive him away. But if that's what it took, so be it. Although it was the hardest thing she'd ever done, she slipped his jacket from her shoulders and held it out to him. She didn't want any evidence here that might lead to more questions.

"What about DNA?" she blurted.

Zane shrugged. "Ours is slightly different from humans. If there is any found, they will think it is a mistake. In any case, I have to remove the body from the morgue later tonight for permanent disposal, preferably before they even begin the autopsy, and destroy any damning evidence. He is at least part vampire and we cannot allow ourselves to be exposure in such a way." His voice was cold and flat as he continued. "I'll make it appear as if members of the cult he belonged to are responsible. Don't worry. I'll take care of it."

Of course he would. She didn't even know why she was concerned. She shivered without the warmth of his jacket around her.

Zane cocked his ear. "The police are coming. Stefan must have made an anonymous call." He released her so suddenly that she staggered before straightening her legs and willing them to hold. "So brave. So independent." He took the jacket from her outstretched hands and then reached out and touched her cheek. "Goodbye, Sophia Daring." Then he was gone, leaving the door wide open behind him.

She cried out, falling to her knees, her hand reaching out to him. Focusing on the task at hand, she grasped the handle of the door, so her fingerprints would be on it. None of the family had touched the door to open it, so that wasn't a concern.

But she still had one more thing to do. Crawling across the floor, she made herself touch the knife handle buried in Spencer's chest, wrapping her fingers tight around the hilt. If they could get any prints off this weapon with all the blood coating it, she wanted them to be hers and hers alone. No matter what Zane believed, the cops would need some forensic evidence or they'd be suspicious. She was sure Zane would weed out the dangerous data and leave them something they wouldn't question. By the time she released the hilt of the knife, she was shaking so hard, she couldn't stand, so she dragged herself toward the door on the crypt. "Help," she cried. "I'm in here." She curled her body into a tight ball of misery and waited.

The first officer came through the door, gun drawn and was quickly followed by others. Controlled chaos ensued more officers arrived, along with a team of forensics experts. Sophia was bundled into a blanket and carried to a waiting ambulance.

Zane stood in the shadows, his heart stone cold as he watched them take Sophia away. The urge to kill them all and to grab her and run was overwhelming. He sensed a presence behind him but didn't turn around.

"She is protecting you. Your presence here would cause complications. You know that you cannot afford to be held for questioning or have your background investigated too vigorously."

He hadn't expected his cousin to return after taking his wife home. Stefan's words couldn't penetrate the layer of ice that encased him. Even if they were true, they were unacceptable. She was his. It was his place to protect her, not the other way around.

"She loves you."

He whirled around and glared at Stefan. "Don't mock me, Dalakis."

Stefan shook his head and sighed. "I would not do that, Zane. You are my cousin, my brother in blood, my family. She is the woman for you, the only one you will ever love."

Zane closed his eyes and swallowed hard. He could hear the ambulance pulling away, taking her farther from him. He could feel her absence beating at his heart, his body and his mind. "I do love her." He hadn't meant to say the words aloud, but they'd been pulled from the depths of his wounded soul.

"And she loves you." Stefan clasped Zane's shoulder, squeezing it tight. "Women are strange and wonderful creatures, my friend. Even after all the years I have lived, all the places I have seen, I cannot say that I truly understand them. But a woman in love will protect her man whether he wants it or not. If you do not believe me, then search her mind."

Therein was the problem. He was too much of a coward to see what was in her mind. He was afraid if he invaded her thoughts that he would find out that she truly didn't want him in her life—plus, he would not do so unnecessarily and without her consent.

Sighing, Zane raked his fingers through his hair. "I have to go." He'd follow her to the hospital and watch out for her until this was over. After that, he'd have to see. Although he could not envision a life without her in it. He didn't want to. If she had made her choice, he would have to respect it. But he would protect her for the rest of her life no matter what. She was his. Now and forever.

Swallowing his anger and his grief, he left the cemetery behind and headed toward the hospital, toward Sophia.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Cassidy drove as fast as he could, but still it wasn't fast enough. The last thing he needed was to get stopped by the cops. For once he wished he were like the Dalakis family. Lucian and Delight would be there long before he was. He hated the feeling of helplessness that engulfed him. It reminded him too much of his childhood when everything was out of his control.

His fingers gripped the steering wheel tight. He'd get Blythe back and when she was safe and sound, they were going to have a long talk about both their pasts. No matter what had happened, he had to deal with it. He really had no choice. He loved her.

There. He'd admitted it to himself. For the first time in his life, he was in love with a woman. He knew she had issues from her past that were affecting her, but they could work through whatever it was. Together. He'd do whatever it took to keep her. If that meant leaving New Orleans, then so be it. If she couldn't accept the Dalakis family, he'd quit his job and get another one. That last thought left a hole in the pit of his belly, but he ignored it. Blythe was all that mattered.

He took the corners hard and quick, concentrating on the ribbon of black in front of him. The streets were fairly crowded as he neared The Club, so he pulled onto a side street and parked, making the rest of the way on foot.

Lucian and Delight were waiting just outside the door for him as he strode up the sidewalk. "What do you know?"

"The place is full tonight. It's the grand reopening." Cassidy could hear the music blaring, feel the vibrations under his feet as Lucian continued. "Adrian has taken over his brother's office. Follow me."

"What about Blythe?"

"She's alive." Cassidy could hear the strain in Delight's voice and knew that this place held terrible memories for her.

"You don't have to go inside." Delight was a very special lady and Cassidy didn't want her hurt in all this.

"I'm fine." She squared her shoulders. "Let's go."

With Lucian leading the way, they walked right past the bouncers who didn't even bat an eyelash. It was good to be with a being with supernatural powers. The noise hit them as they passed through a small corridor and opened the inside door. The stench of sweat, booze, sex and perfume enveloped them as they walked inside. Cassidy scoped the room, quickly noting the heavy presence of men in suits around the perimeter. Good. Prince wasn't as secure as he pretended to be.

"This way." He heard Lucian easily above the din and nodded, following behind him. They kept Delight between them, but no one approached them.

There were two armed men at the bottom of a set of stairs. Cassidy's muscles tensed, but he rolled his shoulders, forcing himself to relax, readying himself to fight. His fingers itched to draw his weapon, but it was too soon. Like a gunfighter, he narrowed his eyes on his target. He was armed and ready.

Lucian stopped in front of the men. "You want to go to the bar for a drink." They stared at him, blank expressions on their faces. "Go," he added softly. Both men stumbled toward the bar without speaking a word.

"You're one scary bastard, you know that?" As many times as he'd witnessed Lucian's power, he couldn't get used to it. "You ever pull that shit on me?" He hoped not, but he couldn't be sure.

Lucian shot him a wicked grin. "No. Your head is much too hard to penetrate."

Cassidy relaxed, but just slightly. It didn't pay to let his guard down around the Dalakis brothers. Not for a second. Not that he'd thought they'd hurt him, but he didn't put it past them to try to make him do something stupid, like quack like a duck, just for kicks.

Lucian laughed as if he'd heard Cassidy's thoughts, but said nothing as they climbed the stairs. Delight reached out and squeezed his arm. "We'll get her back."

He nodded, focusing all his attention on what lay ahead. "I'm going in first." It was still his job to protect the Dalakis family and he intended to do it.

Lucian narrowed his eyes, staring at Cassidy thoughtfully for a few seconds before taking a step backward. He waved his hand toward the door with a flourish. "After you."

Knowing that Lucian would cover his back, he opened the door and stepped inside. His sweeping gaze took in the entire room in one glance. It was a large room with hardwood floors scattered with opulent rugs. The same large desk still dominated the far end as the last time Cassidy was in this room. A comfortable sitting area with plush sofas and chairs was off to one side. The furniture was different, as was the artwork covering the walls.

"Ah, Mr. Cassidy. Come in." The pleasant voice came from the man seated in the large chair situated behind the desk. A tall man in a suit stood just behind him. Cassidy recognized him from his stakeouts. This was Prince's new right-hand man, Saunders. "I was expecting your employer, not his flunky."

Sam ignored the insult and the other man, concentrating on the man in charge. "Adrian Prince."

The man inclined his head as he moved from behind the desk. He was tall and whipcord lean, his face was thin, his hair blond. Cassidy could see the family resemblance to his brother, Jethro.

Prince leaned against the edge of his desk, casually crossing his ankles. He cocked his head to one side. "Now why did Lucian Dalakis send you? Could be I was mistaken about how valuable Blythe was to him." He shook his head in mock sorrow. "I usually don't make such mistakes."

"Where is she?" Cassidy kept all emotion from his voice, knowing that the other man would pounce on any show of weakness.

Prince rubbed his jaw with his fingers. "Maybe not such a mistake after all." He inclined his head just as a door opened. A man who Cassidy recognized pushed Blythe into the room. Another armed thug followed them. The two men from Blythe's apartment. Cassidy wasted a precious second wishing that Stefan had just killed the bastards then.

Unable to stop himself, his eyes flicked toward her. Blythe's face was pasty white, but he could already see the fresh bruises on her face. His jaw tightened and he could feel the vein in his temple throbbing. They'd pay for this.

"You shouldn't have come, Cassidy." Her voice was low and broke on a sob as she said his name. Cassidy, not Sam. She was trying to distance herself from him.

"Of course he had to come," Prince continued cheerfully. "I'm sure Mr. Cassidy and his employer will be all too happy to know more about the woman they've been harboring in their midst." He picked up a tattered journal from his desk. Cassidy tensed when he recognized it as Blythe's.

"I'll admit that I knew some of it, but even I was surprised by the inventiveness of my brother." He chuckled as he leafed through several pages. "Did you know that Blythe was my brother's whore for a year?"

Cassidy took that revelation like a punch to the gut. Blythe paled even more, but said nothing. He'd suspected that she'd had a relationship with Jethro Prince, but he'd hoped that he'd been wrong. "So?" He forced the words out from between clenched teeth.

Obviously, Adrian Prince wasn't anywhere near finished. "My brother had a problem, shall we say, getting aroused. Seems the only way he could have any fun was with oral sex." Prince motioned to the two goons and they shoved Blythe forward. She straightened but kept her gaze on the floor. "Blythe has a quite a talented mouth from what my brother told me. I wish I'd known about her sooner, but alas, he kept her a secret from me until he needed my help. Then he offered her as an enticement. Alas, she'd disappeared before I arrived and then I had other things on my mind. I imagine she makes quite a pretty picture naked on her hands and knees with that sweet mouth open." He squeezed her cheeks between his fingers and jerked her head up. "Maybe you'd like a demonstration."

"Enough." Cassidy took a step forward. "What do you want, Prince?"

Prince feathered his fingers through Blythe's blonde hair before grabbing it and yanking her head back. She winced but didn't cry out. "I want your employer and his wife. It took me quite a while to figure out what happened here three years ago. No one

in the club remembered anything. But there were a few outside the club who remember seeing your brother come into the club, but not leaving. It didn't take long to figure out that your brother had something to do with it, especially since Jethro made the unfortunate mistake of kidnapping young Chase Deveraux." Hooking his fingers in the front of Blythe's blouse, he ripped it open, exposing her plain white bra and bare stomach. "The entire situation was a fuck-up from start to finish."

Cassidy wanted to shoot the bastard, but he was too close to Blythe. Not to mention the fact that there were three more of Prince's men to contend with. "My employer isn't coming."

Prince shook his head. "Too bad." He shoved Blythe's bra aside and palmed her breast. Blythe's breathing deepened and he could see the fear spark in her blue eyes just before they went blank. Prince waved at Cassidy with his free hand. "You can go. We are finished. Just be sure and tell your employer that I'm not done with him. Not by a long shot."

"I'm not going anywhere without Blythe." A feeling unlike any he'd ever felt in his life surged through him. No matter what she'd done in her past, she'd had a damn good reason for doing it. He'd gotten to know her well this past week and she was intelligent, loyal, funny and...his. Something deep in his gut recognized her as his and, if he didn't trust anything else, he trusted his instincts.

"What do you say, Blythe?" Prince slid his hand down her stomach, leaving one full, creamy breast exposed. The two goons were practically drooling on themselves, but Saunders seemed strangely unmoved.

Cassidy watched her closely as she licked her lips. "You should go." Her words were calm and clear.

He couldn't believe his ears. His heart ceased to beat and his limbs felt as if they were filled with lead. "You can't mean that."

"You heard the lady." Prince waved toward the door. "Go while I'm feeling generous. The boys and I are going to have some fun."

Cassidy tensed, his mind trying to figure out where Lucian was. With his powers, he might be in the room and no one would know it. There had to be a way to get Blythe away from them without her getting hurt.

"Please, Sam," she pleaded. "Just go."

Sam. She'd called him Sam. The woman was protecting him. He wanted to roar and rip the room apart. It was his job to protect her and it was time that she accepted that.

He shook his head at her. "Sorry, Blythe, but I'm not leaving without you." He could see the surprise in her face and then the dawning of hope in her eyes. It was dashed when Prince spoke again.

"You had your chance. I can see that we'll just have to kill you and send your body back to your employer. That should send them a message that they'll understand." He beckoned to Saunders, who'd stood silently to one side.

"You want to speak with me." Lucian materialized as if out of nowhere.

Prince jerked as if startled, but quickly recovered. "Lucian Dalakis, I presume. Now if only your dear wife was here, it would be perfect."

"I'm here." Delight stepped through the open doorway. Sam loved both her and Lucian more at that moment than he ever had. They were risking themselves for him. And for Blythe.

Prince stared at Delight. "You're the reason my brother died."

"No," Cassidy corrected. "Your brother died because he was an insane criminal. It was only a matter of time until someone murdered the sonofabitch."

Prince hauled a nine-millimeter semiautomatic from his pocket and aimed it at Delight. "Perhaps. But she was the cause." He wrapped his arm around Blythe, dragging her forward. "Women are always so much trouble."

"Stop." That one word froze everyone in their tracks. Lucian stepped forward. "I will offer you the same deal that I did your brother. Leave us alone and I'll let you live."

Prince laughed. "I'm the one with the gun on your wife, Dalakis."

Blythe chose that exact moment to lift her feet. The unexpected movement threw Prince off guard and he dropped her, stumbling forward in the process. Cassidy drew his weapon and fired at the two goons in the corner, knowing Lucian would deal with Prince. Both men fell as Cassidy continued to fire. Blythe crawled toward the desk, keeping her hand over her head.

Prince fired even as he staggered to one side, but Delight was no longer there. His body jerked. Blood appeared on his chest as he fell to his knees. All eyes flew to Saunders, who stood with his feet spread and his gun still on the fallen Prince. "Matt Austin, ATF on special joint assignment with the FBI." Gone was the man who lowered his head in a deferential manner. In his place was a self-assured man who meant business. His brown eyes gleamed with a combination of anger and satisfaction as he checked to make sure that Prince was indeed dead.

Cassidy slowly lowered his weapon. "Sam Cassidy, former New Orleans police detective."

"I know who you are. I know who all of you are." He stepped slowly toward Blythe. "Are you all right, Ms. Nixon?"

"Fine. I'm..." She swallowed hard. "Fine." She tugged down her bra and pulled the ends of her blouse together.

Saunders glanced at the door as he walked toward the bodies of the two men that Cassidy had shot and nudged them with his shoe. "They're both dead," Cassidy offered. He hadn't been taking any chances and had shot to kill.

"So I see." Saunders sighed. "This creates some problems."

Lucian stepped forward. "No. It doesn't."

"Lucian." Cassidy put a dose of warning in his voice. This involved two federal government agencies. This could be a mess of epic proportions.

"Unfortunately, it does." He stared down at Prince, sighing again. "Two years of my life I've spent chasing Adrian Prince. My department and the Bureau have sunk a lot of money and man-hours into this operation and now all I've got is a dead guy. I needed to know so much more."

"I thought you were Prince's man."

Saunders shrugged. "He doesn't share anything with anyone. Now we'll never know the extent of their operations, who they were dealing with, who all their contacts were."

"Yes you can." Blythe stood slowly, using the desk to pull herself upward. Disregarding everyone else in the room, Cassidy strode to her. Ignoring her struggles, he hauled her into his arms.

"Don't ever scare me like this again," he muttered into her hair as he wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. He wasn't letting go of her again. Ever.

"I'm sorry." Her reply was muffled against his chest.

"That's okay." He smoothed his hand over her hair. "All that matters is that you're safe."

She pulled away from him, staring up into his eyes. "But," she glanced away. "What about..." She motioned to the room and dropped her hand back down by her side. "You know everything."

Cassidy gently cupped her precious face in his hands, willing her to understand. "All that matters is that you're safe," he repeated. "Nothing else matters. Nothing."

She swallowed hard and buried her face against him. He breathed a sigh of relief when he felt her slender arms slip around him, hugging him back.

"I don't mean to interrupt, but what the hell did you mean we can find out everything about the Princes' operations?" Saunders was glaring at them and Cassidy could sense the other man's growing impatience and unease. Saunders kept glancing toward the now-closed office door.

"No one will bother us." Lucian held Delight close to him, his focus on the agent.

"How can you be sure?" Saunders asked.

"Trust him." Cassidy reluctantly pulled Blythe back so that he could see her face. "What did you mean, sweetheart?"

Blythe reached around and picked up the tattered journal. "I was in this club for a year. Jethro Prince got to the point where he treated me like the furniture." Cassidy tightened his arms around her. "I listened and I took notes."

Saunders took the journal when she offered it to him. He flipped it open and read a few pages, whistling almost soundlessly. "This is pretty explosive stuff." He ran his fingers through his short brown hair and swore under his breath as he continued to read.

"And that's not all." Blythe stepped away from him and it was all Cassidy could do to let her go. She walked over to the fireplace, knelt down and reached inside the

blackened hearth. "Jethro was paranoid about everything and everyone. He kept journals about all his dealings. That's where I got the idea of keeping my own." She pulled out one of the stones and laid it aside. Then she reached her hand into the dark opening and withdrew a small fireproof container. She spun the combination lock and began turning the dial on the top of the box. "He never even noticed me watching him open it."

Cassidy's blood ran cold as he realized the risks she'd taken. Prince would have killed her without hesitation if he'd known what she'd done.

She flipped the lid open and lifted out a journal. "These are some of his business dealings."

Saunders was almost beside himself with glee. "This is fantastic. We'll be able to start shutting down the drug operation from the source and who knows how many other operations."

"There's more." Blythe got the man's attention quickly.

"Where?"

"First, we deal."

Saunders's eye's narrowed dangerously. "What do you mean, deal?"

Cassidy positioned himself protectively next to Blythe. "The Dalakis family has nothing to do with this," she began.

Lucian sucked in a breath and stepped forward. "You are protecting my family, yet again, Blythe. While I thank you, I cannot allow you to put yourself in harm's way again."

"It's not your choice." She turned away from a slightly stunned Lucian. Cassidy fought the urge to chuckle. Blythe was unlike any woman he'd ever met. He sobered quickly. She'd have had to be in order to survive a year with Prince.

"No, it's my choice." Saunders got their attention quickly.

Lucian's eyes narrowed and Cassidy jumped into the fray before the agent said something that would set off Lucian's temper. "Then make it."

Saunders rubbed his hand over his chin as he holstered his weapon and withdrew his cell phone. "All I have is Adrian Prince's say that you were involved in his brother's murder." He nodded toward Lucian. "The man is now dead, so who's to say if he's right or wrong. The police investigated?" He glanced at Cassidy, who nodded. "That's good enough for me. But tonight is a bit harder to explain. I've got three bodies out of two different weapons."

Cassidy thought quickly. "Let Lucian and his wife go home. You can say that you saw me in the club tonight and knew I'd come looking for Blythe. I'm an ex-cop. You could say that you asked for my help in freeing her."

Saunders stared thoughtfully for a moment. "That could work."

"I'll make sure you get Jethro Prince's personal papers as well," Blythe added.

Saunders made his decision quickly. "Okay. You two go home." He hit a button on his cell phone and began talking a moment later.

Lucian raised his eyebrow, but Delight just elbowed him in the ribs. "Thank you, Mr. Saunders – or, should I say, Mr. Austin." She walked over to Blythe and hugged her. "Come back to the house when you're finished up here."

"You'd still want me in your home?" Cassidy could feel Blythe shaking with nerves as she leaned against him.

"Of course." Delight frowned slightly. "You're our friend and it's your home now." She glanced at Cassidy and smiled. "I don't think Cassidy would have it any other way."

Lucian strolled over to stand beside his wife. He smiled gently at Blythe as if sensing her unease. "Our home is yours for as long as you wish it."

Saunders hung up his phone. "You've got about a minute to get out of here before the place is crawling with federal agents."

"We will take our leave then." Lucian stared hard at the man before turning and escorting Delight from the room.

The three of them waited in silence, and less than two minutes later the pounding of feet could be heard on the stairs. Men and women, weapons drawn, came pouring into the room. With his Saunders persona dropped for good, Matt Austin began directing the investigation.

Cassidy and Blythe were questioned and then Blythe led them to an apartment just down the hallway where she produced another locked box filled with incriminating documents and financial journals.

Cassidy cursed the long night that followed as they were taken away and questioned separately. The only thing that made it palatable at all was the fact that Matt Austin had assured him that he'd watch out for Blythe.

He was used to being on the other side of the investigation and didn't like feeling so out of the loop. The hours went on as the night faded and became day. Finally, early in the afternoon, Cassidy was released with a thank-you from both agencies for his help and cooperation. With the statement from their own agent, there would be no charges filed against him for the deaths of Prince's two men.

Relieved, Cassidy stepped out of the interrogation room and went in search of Blythe. He found Matt Austin first and the other man's words split his heart in two.

"She was released an hour ago and she left."

Cassidy nodded, got Austin to call him a cab and dragged himself outside to wait. He'd have to go back to the club sometime today and retrieve his car. Hopefully, it would still be there and not being dismantled in some chop shop. Not that he really cared. He could always get another vehicle. All that mattered was Blythe and she was gone.

The sunshine seemed to mock him as he got in the taxi and went home. He felt numb for the first half of the ride and then he got angry. How dare she leave him a second time? He'd track her down and this time he wasn't letting her out of his sight until they'd talked everything through.

He paid the cabdriver and let himself in through the side gate. The family would all be asleep at this hour of the day, but he knew they'd lend him their help and support when they arose. Bounding up the stairs to his apartment, he threw open the door and came to a dead stop.

"Hi." Blythe rose from the sofa, looking all soft and warm and, he realized, incredibly nervous.

"Hi yourself." He swallowed hard as he shut the door and moved toward her. His heart was pounding as he stopped in front of her. He raised his hands to touch her and then dropped them back by his sides. If he touched her, he'd forget all his good intentions, and they needed to talk first. As tough as it was, he made himself take a step away from her. Blythe hunched her shoulders and glanced down at the floor. Cassidy steeled himself for the coming confrontation. It wouldn't be easy, but he knew that they needed both their pasts laid out with no secrets between them if they were to have a chance.

He jammed his hands in his jeans pockets and took a deep breath. "We need to talk."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Blythe knew that this had been a mistake. If she'd been listening to her head, she would have grabbed her stuff and ran while she'd had the chance. But after what had happened, her heart had pleaded with her to take a chance on her and on Sam. The man had risked his life for her. That had to mean something.

Sure it does, the voice in her head assured her. It means that he's a good man with a huge streak of responsibility.

"I took a shower. I didn't think you'd mind." Great, now she was babbling.

His harsh features softened slightly. "No, I don't mind." He stared at her so long she began to feel uncomfortable and it took all her effort to keep from squirming. "How are you feeling?" The low tone of his voice sent shivers down her spine.

She shrugged and sat back down on the sofa before her knees gave out and she crumpled to the ground in an ignominious heap. "I'm okay." Her face ached and was bruised and her lip was cut, but overall, she wasn't too bad physically. Mentally was another story altogether.

Sam lowered himself to the coffee table in front of her and propped his elbows on his knees, resting his chin in his hands. "Why didn't you wait for me?"

She glanced away and picked at the fabric of her jeans. "I didn't know how long you'd be."

"I hated the fact that they wouldn't let me be with you during your questioning."

She swallowed hard as humiliation swamped her. Being forced to lay out the details of the worst year of her life in front of a roomful of strangers had almost been as bad as the year itself. They'd examined her statement from every angle, asking all manner of embarrassing questions. "They were only doing their jobs."

"I know that, darlin', but that doesn't mean that I liked it." His voice went down a notch, the husky tone stroking her flesh like a physical caress. She shivered and this time it wasn't because of her horrible memories. Her breasts swelled and her sex began to throb. It was almost a shock to her how easily Sam aroused her. No matter how many times it happened, she didn't think she'd ever get used to it.

"Look at me, Blythe." As much as she didn't want to, she found the courage to face him. He knew it all now. Oh, not the gritty details, but he knew that she'd spent a year with Jethro Prince.

His pale blue eyes were filled with an emotion she couldn't quite place. It wasn't anger. It wasn't sorrow. But it seemed to be a mixture of the two. Or maybe she was just deluding herself. Seeing things that weren't really there. "I suppose you want to know what happened?"

"Only if you want to tell me." He gently feathered his fingers over the side of her face before letting his hand drop back into his lap. Her stomach jumped and she placed a hand over it to try to settle her nerves as he continued. "I want to know why you left me, why you ran."

He'd surprised her again, but then again, he'd been doing that since the moment they'd met. She really didn't understand this man. Most men—well, decent men—wouldn't want anything to do with her after discovering her sordid past.

She licked lips that were suddenly dry, trying not to groan when his eyes followed the movement of her tongue. "I figured it was time to go. To take my problems and leave."

Sam reached out and took her hand in his. It was a large hand with a broad palm and strong fingers, but his grip was gentle and careful. "There's a basic problem with your thinking, darlin'."

There. He'd called her darlin' again. The way his voice lowered to a sensual growl when he said it sent sparks spinning through her blood. Cream seeped from her, softening the already swollen folds of her sex. It was hard to concentrate with him sitting so close to her. She could feel his body heat and he smelled delicious—a combination of sandalwood soap and hot male. She forced herself to respond. "What's the problem?" Her own voice sounded breathy, like a contented purr.

"I don't want you to leave. Not now. Not ever."

She shook her head, not understanding what he was saying. He misinterpreted it as denial and tightened his hold on her as he scooted forward, surrounding her legs with his.

He tucked a lock of her blonde hair behind her ear with his free hand. "I won't rush you, Blythe, but I want you."

His blunt words made everything inside her go still. Surely she wasn't hearing him properly. "You still want me?" She sounded like a parrot, mimicking his words.

He nodded as he continued to touch her, stroking his thumb over her bottom lip. It was getting harder for her to breathe and she sucked in a huge gasp. "I've come to know you pretty well in the time we've spent together. Enough to know that you're a very special lady and I want you in my life."

"You don't know anything about me." The pained confession slipped from her lips. She wanted to call her words back, wanting what he offered but afraid to believe it was real. Still, she couldn't be anything less than honest with him. He'd risked his life for her. She owed him.

Sam's eyes narrowed as he scowled at her. "I don't care about that business with Prince." He suddenly released her and sat back, running his fingers through his hair in obvious agitation. "No, that's not true. I do care."

Her hopes, which had started to rise, plummeted again.

"I care insomuch as it affected you. It hurt you." She could see the pain and sorrow in his eyes and was touched to realize that it was all for her. "I wish I could take away that year of your life. But I can't. It's part of what made you the woman you are today. And lady, you are one special woman." She started to speak, but he wasn't finished yet. "I know that if you were with Jethro Prince, then you had a damn good reason for it."

She sat there, stunned by his unquestionable belief in her. Even the federal agents had had a hard time believing her at first, and that was with all the evidence right in front of them. As easy as that, the story came tumbling out of her.

"Jethro Prince was obsessed with me from the first time he saw me sing. He offered me a job in his club. The money was phenomenal and I needed it. Badly." She watched Sam carefully, wanting to gauge his reaction, but he showed absolutely no emotion. He had on what she supposed was his "cop" face.

"Anyway, he made a pass at me and I turned it down. That's when everything changed." She shuddered and had to swallow back the bile that threatened.

"You don't have to go on, Blythe." His soft offer soothed her slightly, but she was bound and determined to finish. She shook her head and started to continue, but Sam was already moving. She shrieked slightly as he shifted to the sofa, picked her up and cradled her in his arms. "If you're going to finish this story, darlin', I need to hold you."

The warmth and strength from his arms cradled her, giving her the boost of courage she needed to carry on. "He found out that my mother was sick and needed hospital care that I couldn't afford. He offered to pay if I'd sleep with him and only him."

Sam's hold tightened reflexively around her and then slowly relaxed, his large hand stroking her arm softly. "But you turned him down."

It wasn't a question. "How did you know?" She knew her shock was written on her face by the slight smile he gave her.

"I know you, Blythe. No amount of money could make you sleep with a man."

His belief in her touched something deep in her soul, something she'd thought was damaged beyond repair. "No, money wouldn't do it."

"It was your mother, wasn't it?" Once again she was reminded that this man had been a cop, and a damn good one. He'd put the pieces together easily.

"Yes." It hurt to admit it out loud, but once she had, it got easier to finish the tale. "He had his men take pictures of my mother. When he showed them to me, he told me how vulnerable a sick woman was when she spent hours by herself every day. I had to work. I hated to leave her." She needed Sam to understand that.

"You did what you had to do. I'm sure your mother understood that." His big hand continued to brush up and down her arm, moving lower with each stroke so that he was caressing her hip and thigh.

She leaned into him, savoring the hard feel of his chest against her cheek. "I hope that she did. I didn't have a choice. Jethro told me that he'd kill her if I didn't do everything he asked."

"Bastard." She could hear the barely restrained fury in Sam's voice.

"Yes," she nodded in agreement. "He was a bastard, a very sick one. He dressed me how he wanted and I came to the club every night at six and got to leave at six the following morning. I sang and he showed me off to all his friends. I'm damned lucky he was possessive and didn't pass me around to his pals. I'd seen him do that before with some of his other women." Her teeth started to chatter. She was so cold in spite of the warmth from Sam's body.

"Blythe." He tilted her chin up using the edge of his fist. "That's enough."

"No," she protested. Like lancing a wound, she knew the only way to ever heal was to get rid of the poison within her, making sure that there was none left to fester. "He couldn't get an erection in the normal way and it made him crazy. The only way he could get it up was with oral sex. So that's what he demanded every single night." Memories went through her mind at rapid speed. Pictures of her naked, kneeling in front of him, her mouth on his cock while he tugged her hair and thrust himself in and out of her mouth. She gagged and coughed at the intense memory.

"Blythe. That's enough." Strong arms rocked her back and forth. "Just breathe, darlin'." He repeated those words over and over and finally she began to calm down enough so that she was no longer choking. "That's good. You're doing great. You're safe now with me and you never have to go through that again."

She raised her head and sniffed as tears rolled down her cheeks. She'd never felt this safe and secure in her life. Sam Cassidy was a miracle. Shock filled her when she looked at him. His eyes were damp, his face contorted in pain. She'd done this to him.

"I'm sorry, Sam."

He groaned like a man in pain and gripped her tighter. "Don't you ever apologize. Not for that. Never for that." His gaze was fierce and it occurred to her that she wasn't afraid of Sam. She knew deep in her soul that he'd never hurt her.

Wrapping her arms around him, she hugged him, giving him the words that she'd been afraid to offer him before. The words that she'd been afraid that she'd never be able to tell him after she'd been taken by Adrian Prince's men. "I love you, Sam." He stilled, studying her face, searching for the truth. She met his gaze evenly. "I don't expect you to love me back or anything. I just needed to tell you."

Sam surged off the sofa with her still held tight in her arms. Once again, she was reminded of how much larger he was compared to her. "You can't take it back," he muttered, his voice low and husky. She linked her arms around his neck as he carried her toward the bedroom.

She didn't blame him for being unsure. After all, she'd run from him. "I was coming back." He halted just inside the bedroom door and she could feel the tension running through his large body. "When I left the bank, I had a choice. Left took me to

the bus station and right would bring me back to you. I was turning right, Sam, when they caught me and took me."

He groaned, burying his face in the curve of her neck. "Thank you."

She twined her fingers in his hair, holding him tight. "I'm not sure I can do this, Sam." She wanted to make love with him, but wasn't sure how she'd react after all she'd been through with Jethro Prince. The last time they'd tried had turned into a fiasco. Her body wanted him, but she wasn't sure if she was emotionally ready.

"Whatever you want, darlin'. I just need to touch you, to hold you. We won't do anything you're not comfortable with and we can stop at any time."

If it had been any other man, Blythe never would have believed him, but this was Sam. She nodded. "Okay."

Cassidy wanted to rage and yell and pound his fists against the walls. If Jethro Prince hadn't already been dead, he would have gladly killed the man with his bare hands. He didn't think that Blythe realized that she'd talked out loud when she'd described what Prince had done to her. She'd been lost in her nightmarish memories and now they were his as well. He almost broke down and bawled for the first time since he was a kid. It had been damn close, but he'd managed to hold it together.

When she'd said she'd loved him, his heart had stopped only to start pounding a second later. He hurt for her. For what she'd had to endure. But she'd survived. Even better, she'd found a way to defeat the past by turning evidence against the Prince family. She was smart and funny and loyal and his. He couldn't take away her past, but he could damn well make sure that her future was a good one – with him.

He wanted to touch her. No, needed to touch her, to reassure himself that she truly was all right. The hours they'd been apart during the interrogation had been hell. He knew that she'd been hurt again. Oh, not enough to warrant a trip to the hospital, but still her precious face was bruised again. He wasn't sure about the rest of her body, but he was going to find out.

Carrying her to the foot of the bed, he lowered her legs until she was standing on her own two feet with him behind her. She swayed, so he held her until she was steady. He turned them slightly until they were facing the antique mirror that stood in the corner. "I want to look at you." Every muscle in his body was twitching, ready for action, but he wouldn't make a move without her agreement. This had to be her choice.

She met his gaze in the mirror and nodded. His fingers slid around her waist, stroking the soft strip of flesh just above her bellybutton. He could feel the muscles in her tummy jump, but she didn't flinch away from him. His cock began to swell as the sweet scent of the soft, warm woman in his arms reached his nostrils.

Taking his time, he slid his hands under her top, pushing it upward and finally over her head. Dropping it to the floor, he stared at her in the mirror. Her breasts were moving up and down as her breathing deepened. He knew it was part fear and part arousal as her nipples were puckered tight against the soft cotton fabric of her bra.

"You are so beautiful, Blythe, inside and out." The late afternoon sun shone in through the window, wrapping her in its glow. His breath feathered across her nape and as he watched, goose bumps rose on her flesh. He rubbed his hands gently up and down her arms as he leaned inward, placing an openmouthed kiss on the back of her neck.

She shivered and leaned back against him, her entire body softening against his. "Beautiful," he murmured again as he rested his hands on her stomach and then began the slow slide upward. He paused just beneath the curve of her breasts. She sucked in a breath, but didn't move. "Only if you want, darlin'," he reminded her.

Her hands covered his and they stood there, neither of them moving. Her eyes met his, steady and sure as she repositioned his hands until they were covering the plump mounds. "I want." Her voice, a husky whisper, had his cock twitching against the zipper of his jeans, urging him to hurry. He struggled for control, knowing that he needed it more now than ever. He never wanted to do anything to frighten Blythe. "Should we close the drapes?"

"Only if you want to, darlin'. I'd rather see all of you, but it's your choice."

"Leave them open."

Pleased, he made slow circles with his thumbs, caressing her nipples. "You feel good. So soft and more than a handful." She laughed as he'd hoped she would, a smile playing around the corner of her lips.

"You're a breast man?"

"I'm a Blythe man," he corrected. "There isn't anything about you that doesn't fascinate me." Taking a chance, he flicked the front closure of the bra with his fingers and peeled the cups away. When she didn't protest, he leaned back long enough to tug the straps down her arms. The bra fell to the floor, unnoticed by either of them. All Cassidy's attention was focused on Blythe.

This time when he touched her, he felt only soft, supple flesh. His hands molded her breasts, his fingers stroked them, brushing over her distended nipples. They were large and rosy and he had to taste them.

"Keep watching in the mirror." He shifted until he was in front of her, angling his body so she could still see. Then he leaned down and flicked his tongue over her nipple. She moaned and swayed closer to him. Encouraged by her reaction, he did it again, this time curling his tongue around her hard nub.

Her breath caught in her throat. "Again."

Cassidy kissed the swollen tip before wrapping his lips over it and sucking gently. Her fingers dug into his shoulders, her nails making small crescent wounds in his skin. His erection was throbbing nonstop and his balls ached. Reaching down, he undid the button on his jeans and tugged down the zipper. His cock pushed against his underwear, so he shoved it out of the way, breathing a sigh of relief, which was short-lived as Blythe chose that moment to cup the back of his head, tugging him closer.

It was everything he'd imagined it would be and more. She tasted sweet and salty as he sucked and laved first one nipple and then the other. He cupped her breasts, teasing them with his fingers. Blythe sucked in a breath and then whimpered, her hips swaying toward him.

"More?"

Her eyes were glazed with desire as she nodded and that was all the permission that he needed. Ever-so slowly, he sat back on his heels and reached for the opening of her jeans. He undid the button and slid down the zipper. Reaching his hands inside the fabric, he shoved it over her hips, taking her plain white bikini underwear with it. He was thankful that she wasn't wearing shoes. It was simple enough for him to remove her socks as he got her to lift one foot at a time as he whisked off her jeans and panties.

Then she was gloriously naked in front of him. She quivered and started to cover herself, only to stop and drop her arms by her sides. "You too."

He realized then that he was still totally dressed. Stupid. The last thing he wanted her to feel was as if she were on display for him. He didn't want past memories tainting their first time together.

He quickly stood and shucked his shirt, only taking the time to undo the buttons at the cuff and the neck before yanking it over his head and tossing it aside. It took him a bit longer to pull off his boots and socks. His jeans were already open, his erection standing tall and proud, proclaiming his need for her. "Are you sure?" It might kill him if she said no, but he'd get through it somehow. Still he heaved a sigh of relief when she nodded. His jeans and underwear were discarded in record time and he stood before her, letting her look her fill.

Her light blonde hair was tousled, forming a halo around her face. Her lips were damp, her mouth parted. Her blue eyes were wide as she reached out and touched his cock. The head bobbed toward her as she stroked her thumb over it. A thick pearl of fluid seeped from the tip and she spread it over the head.

Her nipples glistened in the afternoon sun from where he'd sucked them. Reaching out, he touched them gently, groaning when she wrapped her hand around his shaft and stroked. "You keep that up and I won't last."

She jerked her hand away. "I'm sorry."

Cassidy picked up her hand and returned it to his cock. "I'm not, but I'd rather be inside you when I come."

She hesitated and then smiled. "I think I'd like that too."

Scooping her up into his arms, he laid her down on the bed and followed, stretching out beside her. Leaning down, he kissed her. Softly. Slowly. Her lip had a small cut and her face had to be sore, so he was very gentle, grazing his mouth over hers. She gasped and parted her lips and he stroked his tongue inward, savoring the taste of her. Like a fine wine, she seduced him without even trying. Her hand fluttered upward, stroking the side of his face as he deepened the caress. He wanted to devour her but knew that a deeper kiss would have to wait until she was healed.

Breaking the kiss, he left a string of kisses down the line of her jaw and then down the curve of her neck. He lingered over her breasts, enjoying the way she moaned as he sucked her nipples. Her legs shifted restlessly, her hips tilting toward him, seeking his hardness and his heat as her fingers clutched at his shoulders. He rubbed his cock against her thigh, groaning when she reached out and stroked him with her hand.

His cock was throbbing continuously now, his balls tight to his body. He swallowed hard and thought about a cold shower. It didn't help. Knowing he was running out of time, he shifted lower, making a place for himself between her spread thighs. She whimpered and he looked up at her. "Yes," she moaned.

Her legs widened and he took a deep breath, still fighting for control. Her musky scent wafted up, enticing him, luring him. He stroked his hands up the insides of her thighs as he lowered his head. Using his thumbs, he opened her sex wide. She was wet and pink and absolutely beautiful. And if he'd had any doubts about her being a natural blonde, they were gone. Even her pubic hair was light blonde.

He licked up one side of her labia and down the other, reveling in her whimpers of need. His tongue flicked over the tight bud of nerves at the apex of her sex and she arched upward, crying out his name.

Desire, pride and pleasure surged through him. He wanted her to come. He stroked her with his fingers, dipping one inside her opening. The muscles clenched around them as he withdrew.

"Sam," she groaned, wrapping her legs around his shoulders to hold him tight to her.

This time, he thrust two fingers inside her. Her hips arched as he stroked her clitoris with his tongue. Her heels dug into his back as he pulled his fingers out and shoved them in again. "Come for me." He blew on her heated flesh and she cried out again. Sweat was dripping down his temple and his back. With the last sunshine of the day embracing her in its warmth, she looked like a pagan goddess come to life.

He pushed her harder with his fingers and mouth. Felt the tension rising in her. His cock ached and throbbed, but he ignored it, all his attention on Blythe. She went rigid, a soft keening noise escaping her lips as she came. Her body bucked and heaved as he continued to push her with his fingers. Dampness drenched his hand as her inner muscles contracted and relaxed. Finally, she let out a soft whimper and collapsed, her legs sliding off his back to land with a thump on the mattress.

Cassidy heaved a sigh of relief and reached down to press hard just beneath his balls. Liquid seeped heavily from the tip of his cock and he gritted his teeth and tried not to think about the warm woman lying next to him who'd just come so sweetly. Her scent was all around him and on his hands. Shifting to the side, he pulled himself up beside her and buried his face in the pillows.

Blythe slowly floated back to earth. She'd had an orgasm before, but it had been years ago, long before she'd ever heard the name Jethro Prince. But she was darn sure

that it had never been anything that resembled what had just happened. She felt totally relaxed, absolutely safe and completely sated.

Her toes curled into the blankets beneath her and she sighed. She wanted to roll around on the sheets and purr like a contented cat. She opened her eyes when Sam shifted up to lie beside her. She blinked when he buried his face in the pillow, not looking at her. Before she could work up a good worry about what was wrong, he groaned. She could see his hand between his thighs and realized that he hadn't come.

Okay, so it wasn't her fault she'd forgotten all about him. He'd played her body as if it was a finely tuned instrument and he was a master player. She hadn't been able to think about anything. Only been able to feel.

"Sam." He flinched when she touched his shoulder, but turned his head so he was facing her. "Thank you."

She almost smiled at the look of barely repressed lust on his face. "You're welcome." He buried his face back in the pillow. It was then she realized that he didn't expect anything out of her. He thought that they were finished.

If she hadn't already loved him, she would now. For the first time in years, she felt feminine confidence surge through her. Apparently, the year in purgatory with Jethro Prince hadn't injured her permanently as she'd feared. But she was smart enough to know that it might have taken her years to start the process of recovering if she hadn't met Sam. And she wasn't fooling herself. This was just the beginning, but it was a darn fine way to start.

"Sam." She waited until he turned his head to look at her. "Can you roll over?" He took a deep breath and heaved himself onto his back. She stared at his impressive erection. The head of his cock was red and wet and the blue vein that ran the entire length pulsed under her gaze. "Do you have any condoms?"

His pale blue eyes darkened slightly and then one corner of his mouth kicked up in a smile. "In the top drawer of the bedside table." She reached over him and opened the door, ignoring his groan as her breast grazed him. Then it was her turn to moan when he surged up and clamped his mouth around her nipple, sucking hard.

Laughing, she managed to keep a hold of the box as she all but fell back onto the bed. Sam shot her an unrepentant grin as she fumbled with the opening of the box and hauled out a foil packet. She'd never laughed in bed before. Everything was different with Sam.

With his blond hair and blue eyes, he looked like a Greek sculpture sprawled out on the bed. Every muscle was chiseled to perfection and he had the lightest brushing of hair on his chest, which narrowed down to a thicker amount around his cock. And he was all hers to enjoy. His erection strained upward as she carefully rolled the latex over it. When that was done she threw her leg over his waist, straddling him.

She caressed his chest, loving the hard feel of his muscles beneath her hands. She could feel his heart pounding, hear his breathing getting faster and faster. "Blythe," he

warned and she knew that now was not the time to tease him. He was too close to the edge for that. There would be plenty of other times to touch him and to tease him.

Raising herself up on her knees, she reached behind, gripping his shaft. An inch at a time, she lowered herself, taking him inside her. It was difficult because he was large and her inner muscles were still swollen, but finally he filled her.

"Fuck, you feel amazing." There was no mistaking the admiration in his voice as he gripped her hips in his hands and urged her up. She placed her hands on his hard abs, using them for support as he lowered her back down again. Catching the rhythm, she began to move, slowly at first but quickly gaining speed. Before long, she was lost in their lovemaking, reaching for another orgasm.

Sam released her waist and stroked his fingers over her clit. She felt as if her blood was on fire as she slammed herself back down on him. It wasn't enough. She needed more. "Sam," she cried, not really sure what she was asking him for.

He swore, wrapped his arms around her and rolled them so that she was beneath him. Shoving his arms under her legs, he planted his hands on the mattress up by her shoulders. The new position left her legs wide open and unable to move. She was at the mercy of his thrusts. Groaning, she tilted her hips toward him, pressing her head and shoulders back into the pillows.

"Fuck, yes," he groaned as he began to thrust. He got faster and harder, their sweat-slick bodies sliding together. She could feel the heat in her pussy as the muscles quivered and tightened, signaling her release.

She cried out his name, but it was lost in his yell as he came. She felt the hot pulsing of his cock and wished that she could feel him without a condom. She vowed then that she was going to a doctor as soon as possible to get birth control pills. She'd stopped her prescription after Prince had died, thinking that she'd never need them again. Then all thought was forgotten as her orgasm washed over her. It was even more intense than before and she clutched at Sam for support.

He heaved and shuddered, driving himself into her one more time before collapsing on top of her. She wrapped her arms around him, holding him tight, never wanting to let him go. She protested when he shifted off her.

"I'm too heavy, darlin', and I've got to get rid of the condom." Reluctantly she released him and watched as he rolled to the side of the bed. He removed the condom, dumping it in the trash can that was tucked beside the bedside table and then lay back down in bed, tugging her into his arms.

She sighed, settling herself against him, her fingers playing with the hair on his chest. "I love you." His words made her still and she raised her head. He was serious now, all business, his eyes steady and sure.

She sat up next to him, dragging a pillow into her lap to cover herself.

"I want you to move in with me." He broke off and scrubbed his hand over his jaw. "Hell, I want you to marry me, but I'll take whatever you'll give me."

Her stomach tightened and her breath caught. Had she heard him right? "You want to marry me?"

"Yes, darlin', I do. I'm thirty-five years old and I never knew what love was until I met you."

"Oh, Sam."

"I know you might not be ready, but live with me first."

"Okay."

"I know that you're still freaked out about the whole vampire thing, but if you try living here for a while and don't like it, I can quit and get another job."

Blythe couldn't believe her ears. He loved the Dalakis family. If nothing else, her time here had shown her that. The fact that he'd be willing to leave them for her assured her that she was making the right decision. "I said okay, Sam."

He eyed her uncertainly as if unsure what she was agreeing to. "Okay, what?"

"Okay, I'll marry you after we live together for a while."

A slow, sexy smile crossed his lips. "Really?"

"Really." She smiled back at him. She'd never felt happier in her life.

"Come here." He opened his arms and she went back into them easily, as if she'd been doing it her entire life. It felt like home. He *was* home to her.

"I still have a lot of issues to work through."

"We'll get through them together, darlin'."

He tucked her under his arm and managed to drag one of the blankets over them. The sun was sinking in the distance, wrapping the room and them in shadows. Blythe yawned and snuggled closer to Sam. Together. She liked the sound of that. Contented, she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Five

One month. It had been an entire month since Sophia had seen Zane, since that fateful night that she'd told him he had to leave her. Her life had spiraled out of control and was only now beginning to feel like it was returning to normal. Except nothing would ever be normal again. Everything had changed. She was changed.

She flopped down in her favorite chair, pulled her feet up and wrapped her arms around her knees. She felt tired. Worn out. Certainly, she looked it. The pale face that stared back at her from the mirror each morning was only a ghost of her former self.

She plucked at the ears of her puppy-dog slippers, but even they couldn't make her smile. Tipping her head back against the cushion, she closed her eyes and sighed. Her life had been a roller coaster for the past few weeks.

First, there had been the interviews by the police after she'd been released from the hospital. It had taken her a while to convince them that she'd been able to get out of her shackles and had killed Spencer in self-defense. But since all the evidence had pointed to that, they'd had no other choice except to believe her.

Zane and the other members of the family had done a perfect job at manipulating the evidence. Spencer's body and almost all the forensic data had disappeared. A security guard at the morgue had been knocked unconscious but not seriously hurt when the body was taken. The police were convinced that the cult he belonged to was responsible and were checking into various leads. They hadn't turned up any solid physical evidence on the break-in and theft, and Sophia knew they wouldn't. Zane was too thorough to miss any detail that might implicate himself or the Dalakis family.

Then, she'd visited the families of the two other deceased women, wanting to talk to them personally.

Finally, she'd written about her ordeal and about the cult that Spencer had headed. With the information that the police had uncovered in the crypt, the police had managed to discover Spencer's apartment in the city. With what they'd found there, they'd been able to pick up a few people spread across the country. It would take them months, if not years, to sift through all the information and try to ascertain just how many people these crazies were responsible for killing.

The worst of it was over now. Her testimony was a small part of it since the evidence they had uncovered had condemned Spencer. She was alive and had survived thanks to Zane and the Dalakis family. She was much luckier than Janice Barton and Ariel Woodland. All she had to show for her ordeal were a few scars that would hopefully fade over time.

A tear slipped from beneath her lid and rolled down her face. Angrily, she swiped it away. She'd done more than enough crying this past month and it hadn't changed

anything. She was still alone and she had no idea where Zane was or how to reach him. It had startled her to realize that she didn't even know where he lived. They'd always spent their time together in her apartment.

"And that should tell you something," she muttered as she opened her eyes and leaned forward, propping her chin on her knees. Fine. Their time together had been great. Wonderful. Spectacular even. But it was over. She was an adult and she'd had a flaming sexual affair with an incredible man. So be it.

But her body didn't believe her. She dragged through the days feeling as if a part of herself was missing. She had to force herself to do much of anything, including work and that frightened her. Work had always been her solace. Always. If she didn't have that, what did she have?

And the nights were worse. She shuddered.

At night the dreams would come. Long, hot, erotic dreams filled with images of Zane touching her neck, her breasts, her stomach, her pussy. Squirming in her chair, she sighed and dropped her feet to the floor. No doubt about it, in the short time they'd spent together she'd gotten addicted to his lovemaking. Okay, sex. Better to call it what it was. At least on his part. She on the other hand had come to the unwanted conclusion that she loved the big lug and wasn't that just dandy?

"Suck it up." She rubbed her hands over her arms. No matter what she did these days, she couldn't get warm. The doctor she'd seen at the hospital had warned her that it would take her longer to get past the emotional trauma than the physical and she'd been right. Her bruises and cuts had long healed, but emotionally, she was a mess.

Thankfully, for the first couple of weeks, she'd gone on pure adrenaline and anger and had written furiously about the experience. In many ways it had been therapeutic, both for her and the families of the dead women. Sophia had been approached by the top magazines in the country about her story. The work she'd done in those two weeks would keep her fed and sheltered for the next two years if it had to. And it looked as if it well might. Since she'd crashed during the third week, she hadn't wanted to do much of anything at all.

The few television interviews that she'd granted had padded her bank account even further. If she was frugal, she was solvent for at least five years, maybe longer. It still felt wrong to make money from her ordeal, but Janice Barton's mother had scolded her when she'd mentioned that. The older woman's words still rang in her ears. *You'll be a long time getting over this, Sophia. If they want to give you money so you don't have to worry about rent and expenses, then you should do it if you want to.* Mrs. Barton was a very practical woman and Sophia had come to like and respect her greatly in the past few weeks.

So now she was yesterday's news. The media had slowly filtered away, their attention caught by other things, the least of them being the blood cult that seemed to spread from coast to coast.

It was good to be alone.

Or at least it always had been. Now she just felt lonely. But she didn't want just any company. She wanted Zane's. She hadn't even had the courage to contact the Dalakis family in person. She knew they were respecting her wishes by staying away. Zane had obviously conveyed her request to them and she knew she'd have to make the first move if she wanted to see them again.

She'd called them a few times during the day when she knew they would be sleeping. A couple of times Cassidy had answered and she'd hung up. Other times, she left a message on their machine, updating them. Oh, she knew that Cassidy probably knew as much or more about the investigation than she did, but still. She felt she owed the family something after Laurel Rose and Stefan had risked their lives for her.

As hard as she tried, she couldn't keep her thoughts away from Zane. She loved the way his large, hard body felt tucked next to hers after they'd had sex. She missed his urgency as he stripped her clothing from her, the way he looked at her with lust gleaming in his sharp, green eyes. No other man had ever looked at her like that before.

Her breasts ached and she cupped them with her hands, trying to ease them. But it was no use. Her nipples were hard nubs that rubbed against the thin fabric of her cotton top. She'd stopped wearing a bra again, unable to bear the confining fabric. Even her skin felt overly sensitized so that even the slightest touch was almost too much for her to handle. Her sex was swollen and damp, her core throbbing with emptiness, begging to be filled.

"Stop it!" She surged out of her chair. Raking her hands through her short, spiky hair, she began to pace.

Someone pounded on her front door. "Oh, great. That's just what I need." She thought about ignoring it, but it came again. This time louder and more insistent—a cop's knock. Her memory took her back to a few weeks ago when she'd opened the door to a man who'd changed her life. She moaned as her shirt brushed over her nipples. Swearing, she plucked the fabric away from her skin, but it didn't do much good. It settled back over her nipples, outlining them perfectly.

When she got to the door, she took a deep breath and looked out the peephole. Nothing. The next knock made her jump. Her heart fluttered and began to beat faster. She was quickly losing patience with whoever was on the other side of the door. "Who's there?"

"Zane York. I'm a cop."

She almost smiled at the way he mimicked their very first meeting. Almost. Instead, she leaned her forehead against the heavy wood panel, certain he must be able to hear her heart pounding through the door that separated them. What should she do? Could she face him only to have him leave again? She wanted him to stay, but she wanted him to want to stay. And how convoluted was that?

Sighing, she prayed for strength as she flipped the locks on the door and opened it. God, it should be illegal how good this man looked. Tall, dark and handsome wasn't a cliché when it came to Zane York. Faded blue jeans, soft from many washings, molded

his heavily muscled thighs and displayed his manhood to perfection. She could feel her cheeks heating as she continued her perusal. The seams of his dark green T-shirt were stretched to the limits by his shoulders and biceps.

His face was still as rugged as ever. Not handsome, but compelling. Zane was no pretty boy. He was all man and she still wanted him. Her body, already hot and achy, zoomed into overdrive at his nearness. His musky scent, tinged with sandalwood and male heat seemed to surround her, permeating her skin.

Cream seeped from her core and began to slip down her inner thighs. Great time to remember that she wasn't wearing any underwear. Unable to bear any more weight than necessary against her skin, she'd hauled on her pajama bottoms and a long-sleeved cotton top after her shower. Now she wished she'd at least put on a pair of panties. She felt off-kilter and slightly out of control with him in front of her.

"Can I come in?" She closed her eyes and swallowed hard as his voice stimulated all her nerve endings. She'd dreamed of that voice, but had feared that she'd never hear it again. "Sophia?"

Realizing that she was just standing there like a complete idiot, she stepped back, almost tripping on her slippers. Zane's hand shot out and steadied her before quickly releasing her. "Yeah. Come on in." Great. That sounded calm and in control. Didn't it? Get a grip, girl, she admonished herself as she turned and led him into the living room.

Too nervous to sit, she stood next to her chair with her arms crossed defensively over her chest. Realizing how that must seem, she forced her arms to drop back by her sides and almost immediately realized her mistake. His eyes zeroed in on her breasts immediately and her traitorous nipples puckered even more, standing at attention like little soldiers awaiting a general's inspection. She swayed toward him and grabbed the back of the chair to keep her feet from taking her closer.

She wanted to be in his arms, wanted to feel the security and warmth of his embrace. Instead, she faced him, needing to know why he'd come now after all this time. "Why are you here?"

Zane winced inwardly, not exactly overwhelmed by Sophia's welcome. *Well, what did you expect? She said she didn't want you around*, he thought. Yet her body told a different story. He could see the outline of her pert nipples through her top and, if he wasn't mistaken, he could see the dark red thatch of pubic hair though the thin fabric of her pajama pants.

He licked his lips, not even trying to fight his growing arousal. He'd been too long without her to even hope to have control. His cock began to thicken and lengthen, pressing against the hard zipper of his jeans. Sweat broke out on his body as he struggled to keep from tossing her to the floor, stripping her naked and claiming her body as his once again.

He'd stayed away from her even though each night had been pure torture. She hadn't seen him, but he'd stood in the shadows, watching her, making sure that she was

all right. Her determination and sheer guts had made his heart swell with pride as he'd watched her dealing with the authorities and the news media.

As a male vampire, he'd hated every single moment of their separation. He'd wanted to destroy the police officers who'd spent hours grilling her over and over about her story, even though he knew that they were only doing their jobs. Her physical and mental distress had filled him during the interrogation, making him want to roar with fury. But none of it had showed on her face. Only he knew the extent of her suffering.

The only other incident in his life that even came close to this was his parents' deaths, but even that had been different. He felt everything that she felt, but tenfold. Her pain was his, her anger was his and her tears had brought him to his knees. He never would have made it through this past month if not for his newfound cousins. Even Cristofor had come from Transylvania, bringing his wife and Chase Deveraux with him. They'd talked to him endlessly about the family history and that was the main reason he was here.

That and the fact that he just couldn't bear to spend one more moment away from Sophia. He had to know where they stood once and for all.

The sweet smell of her vanilla-scented soap was mixed with the delicious aroma of arousal that seeped from her sex, softening her folds, making them slick and swollen. He bit back a groan and Sophia leaned forward, growing concern etched on her face.

"Are you all right?" She took a shuffling step forward and he almost smiled at the silly slippers she wore. Sophia was unique and he loved her. That wasn't going to change. Not now. Not ever. Where they went from here was another story altogether.

"No. I'm not," he responded honestly.

She nibbled on her lower lip and he began to sweat even more. His clothing felt tight and confining. "What's wrong?"

He stared incredulously at her. "What's wrong? What's wrong?" The last came out as a guttural growl. "I've spent that last month without you, wanting you every single night, craving the taste of your lips and the scent of your skin."

"Oh." She paled even further, appearing almost shocked.

"Is that all you can say?" All the frustration of the past month came pouring out of him. His hands fisted at his sides. He wanted to grab her and shake her until she came to her senses. But that wasn't going to happen because he'd chop off his own hand before he'd hurt her. He shook his head, trying to clear it as his animalist nature surged forward, demanding he take her and mark her as his.

"What do you want me to say?" Her brows snapped together and the color returned to her face in a heated rush. "You're the one who hasn't been around for the past month."

He couldn't believe she had the audacity to speak to him in such a manner. He'd been honoring her wishes. "You told me to stay away," he managed to spit out from between his clenched teeth.

"Yes, I told you to stay away while the heat was on the story. I didn't tell you to stay away for an entire month. You're a vampire, for heaven's sake! Couldn't you have snuck into my bed...I mean, my apartment sometime during the night without being seen?"

His brain threatened to explode as he processed what she'd said. The way she'd stuttered over the word bed, changing it to apartment made his blood sing. She still wanted him. All the long nights he'd spent alone, thinking he was doing as she'd asked had been nothing but a waste. "All you had to do was call me if you wanted me in your bed."

She crossed her arms under her chest, pressing her small breasts higher. The sight of her tight nipples momentarily distracted Zane. His fingers opened and closed at his sides. He wanted to rip her top off and fill his palms with her. From experience, he knew that his hands would cover her breasts completely, her nipples stabbing the centers.

"If all I wanted was a man in my bed, I could have had a dozen during the past four weeks."

A roar escaped him as he leapt at her. She stumbled back, but there was no evading him. He pressed her back against the wall, grabbed her hands and held them captive with one of his, and leaned down until their noses were almost touching. "You. Are. Mine." Each word was issued in a hard, guttural tone. He wanted no further misunderstandings. He could feel his eyes burning and his fangs lengthening. He'd kill any other man who touched her. She belonged to him. Only him.

Although she was powerless to move, Sophia continued to scowl. "If all you want is sex, what are you waiting for?"

"What, indeed?" Leaning forward, he brushed his lips over hers. When they parted to let him in, he laughed and licked her neck.

"Bastard," she bit out as she tilted her neck to give him better access.

"That and worse," he whispered in her ear as he swirled his tongue over the delicate whorls. "Much worse." He nipped at her lobe, tugging it just hard enough to make her uncomfortable, but not enough to hurt. She tried to rub her breasts against his chest, but he moved back just out of her reach.

"All talk and no action."

Growling, he bit her neck in retribution. Not hard enough to break the skin, but enough to make her jump. His tongue laved the spot, soothing the minor hurt. He knew that she'd have a small bruise there, but it wasn't enough. He needed to claim her, to mark her. He wouldn't be satisfied until his cock was pumping in and out of her slick body and she was begging, no, screaming for him to fuck her, to bite her, to drink from her. Only when he'd fucked them both senseless and taken her blood once again would he be satisfied.

He held his hand up in front of her and allowed one of his fingernails to lengthen. She gasped as she watched. Inserting the sharp nail just inside the neckline of her top,

he pulled down. Fabric ripped. Only their breathing could be heard above it. Releasing her hands, he tore the remnants of the garment down her arms, letting it drop to the floor.

He took a step back, admiring the view. Her breasts, small but firm, were just as lovely as he remembered. Her taut nipples begged for attention. He flicked his fingernail carefully over one hard bud. Sophia flinched and then she moaned, her eyes glazing over. Her response set his blood throbbing through his body, pooling in his groin. His cock was harder than it had ever been and his balls felt so full he was surprised they didn't explode.

Swearing softly, he yanked off his shirt and tossed it aside. His boots and socks followed quickly. She made a soft whimper and he reached out, cupping her breasts and rubbing his thumbs around the edges of her areola. "I love to touch your breasts, Sophia. They're so damn responsive." He plucked at both nipples, watching with pleasure as they seemed to tighten even more. "I promised you a present once before. I've been carrying the damn things around with me for weeks. Dreaming, fantasizing about what would happen when I saw you again. I pictured you wearing them a thousand times over the past month. As long as I had them, I believed there was a chance we'd be together again."

He could see her trying to remember as he toyed with her nipples, but she was caught in the throes of passion. She moaned when he removed one of his hands and reached into his jeans pocket. Her pale green eyes widened when he pulled out two delicate chains with a bead on the end of each.

She licked her lips. "What...what are they?"

"Nipple clamps." Giving her plenty of time to object, he opened one and carefully placed it over her distended nipple. She gasped as the clamp closed tightly around the hard nub. "Does it hurt?"

"Yes. No. Not really. Not anymore." She stared down at her breast and he flicked the bead with his finger, making it swing. She groaned and her hips arched toward him.

"Now for the other one." This time he leaned down and sucked her nipple into his mouth, tonguing it before nipping at the tip with his teeth. Her breathing was getting more rapid by the second. "You like that, don't you, sweet Sophia?" He clamped the second piece of jewelry in place, loving how she arched forward, offering her breast to him. "I'll bet your cunt is hot and wet, isn't it?" He gently set both beads to swaying.

"Yes," she hissed.

"Show me. Strip off your clothing and show me your pretty pussy." She stared at him uncertainly for a moment and then her hands went to the drawstrings of her pants and tugged. As she kicked off her slippers, he moved his hands to the button of his jeans and yanked it open. She shimmied her hips as she pushed the fabric downward. The metallic sound of a zipper being pulled down echoed through the room.

When she was naked, she hesitated.

"Show me."

Throwing back her shoulders, she widened her stance before reaching between her legs and spreading the folds of her sex. She was just as beautiful as he remembered. He fell to his knees in front of her and buried his face between her thighs. Her arousal intoxicated him as he licked a hot path up one side and down the other. He traced each fold with his tongue, absorbing her taste, arousing her even more.

Beads of liquid seeped from the tip of his cock and his balls pulled up tight against his body. He didn't have much time.

He circled her clit with his tongue, pleased when the red bud slipped from its protective hood. Her fingernails dug into his scalp, tugging him closer one moment and trying to pull him away the next. He laughed, drunk on the taste of Sophia.

Sliding his tongue across her sensitive flesh one final time, he then dragged her down on the floor beside him. "On your hands and knees. I want to fuck you from behind."

She crawled away from him, coming up on her hands and knees. He stared at her pussy, wet and pink and open, just waiting for him. It still wasn't enough. Shoving his jeans down around his hips, he pushed his way between her thighs and pressed his erection into the dark cleft of her ass. Her cheeks clenched around him and he sucked in a breath. He could see the sheen of sweat that coated Sophia's back and knew that she was as aroused as he was.

Shifting slightly, he adjusted his hard length so that it went between her thighs, but not inside her. "Zane," she cried as he stroked her clit and her sex with his cock. She squirmed, trying desperately to get him inside her, but he kept his hands on her hips, not allowing that to happen.

"What do you want?" He slid his cock forward, his jaw locking tight as shards of pleasure shot through him. She was so wet his erection skimmed over her easily and effortlessly. "Tell me and I'll give it to you."

"I want you," she wailed, squirming again.

"Not good enough." He leaned down and nipped at her neck, whispering hotly in her ear. "Tell me," he commanded, ready to break.

"Fuck me," she screamed.

Relief flooded him as he pulled back and slipped the head of his cock just inside her slit. Her feminine muscles clutched at him, urging him further. Gripping her hips, he rested his forehead on her back. "Mine," he yelled as he surged forward, burying himself to the balls in her waiting heat.

Her back arched as she pushed herself back toward him. Primal need surged through him. There was no finesse, no style, just fucking at its most basic. He hammered his hips against her, feeling his blood surge through him as he sheathed himself over and over, trying desperately to get deeper inside her with each plunge.

Sophia was panting hard as her ass slammed back against him. His balls surged forward with each thrust, slapping at her slick folds. He could feel her inner muscles clenching and unclenching with greater urgency and knew she was close.

"Come for me," he urged as he leaned forward and sank his teeth into her nape. Blood, sweet and warm, spurted into his mouth and he sucked hard. She bucked even harder against him and might have even unseated him if it wasn't for his unnatural strength. He wrapped one forearm around her stomach and used his other hand to toy with one of her nipple clamps.

Sophia went wild. She thrashed her head from side to side and screamed as she came. Her orgasm flooded through her pussy, her inner muscles contracting, squeezing his cock in a hot vise. His balls tightened and his semen rose through his shaft and erupted out of the tip, shooting deep into her. His head swam as he sucked her blood and continued to hammer his hips into her. Miraculously, she began to come again and he rode her hard as she milked his cock dry.

When she slumped in his arms, he shuddered and withdrew his teeth, dragging his tongue over the puncture wound to close it. Swearing, he carefully pulled out of her, shuddering as her hot cunt reluctantly released him. He turned her over and lifted her into his arms. Her skin was so pale it was almost translucent. He'd taken more blood than he'd planned and definitely more than she could afford to give.

Her breasts brushed his chest and he swore again. The nipple clamps were still in place. Gently he removed each one and tossed them on the coffee table. He laved each tender bud with his tongue in silent apology. She was too new to them to leave them on for so long.

Her eyelids fluttered open and she smiled at him, but her smile faded as he continued to watch her. "What's wrong?"

"I took too much blood. I need to replace yours."

She swallowed hard and shivered. He grabbed the throw from the back of the chair and wrapped it around her. He'd taken her on the floor with all the finesse and care of a rutting bull. It was a wonder she wasn't screaming at him to leave her alone.

"Was this just a quick, easy fuck for you?"

Zane stared at her as if she'd lost her mind. "How can you even ask such a thing?" She shrugged and looked away. He cupped her chin in his strong fingers and tilted it until she was watching him. "There is nothing remotely easy about this, Sophia. You know what I am and what that means."

She nodded again, this time more firmly. "I do."

"Then you know that our relationship will not be the same as a regular one. I will come to you after dark for as long as you wish it."

Her brows came together as she studied him. "You mean you'll drop by at night for a roll in the sack, or the floor or wherever."

"It's all we can have together."

She tried to push out of his arms, but he tightened his grip. Giving up, she laid her head against his shoulder. "You know that's not true. The Dalakis brothers have more with their wives."

"You know I will not risk you and you know why." After what she knew about his past, how could she ask that of him?

"I know that I'm willing to risk it." This time when she pushed out of his arms, he let her go. She staggered to her feet, wrapping the throw around her shoulders. "All or nothing. Don't bother giving me any more of your blood unless you really mean it." She padded toward the hallway. "And don't bother coming back for any more quick fucks. That was the last one. I want a real relationship. If you can't give me that, then it's time for you to go for good."

Zane knelt on the floor, not knowing what to say or do. He wanted what she was offering. God only knew how much. But could he selfishly risk her life and sanity to take what he wanted?

"I'll be in the bedroom." With that, she turned and left him there, and although he willed her to do so, she never looked back.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Sophia staggered down the hallway with tears in her eyes. Her body was still humming with pleasure from the incredible orgasms she'd just had, but her heart was slowly breaking with each step she took away from Zane. She knew what she was asking of him, but she'd had to do it. For her, there was no other choice. After what she'd gone through at the hands of a deranged killer and the subsequent aftermath, she'd come to the conclusion that she wanted a life with Zane.

She loved him. It was as simple and as complicated as that.

Entering her bedroom, she climbed onto the bed and closed her eyes, drifting in a sensual haze. She felt weak but didn't really care. The time seemed to tick by one slow second at a time, mocking her. A tear slid from beneath her eyelid and slipped down her cheek. She ignored it. It was just too much trouble to wipe it away.

She'd gambled and obviously lost. She hadn't heard Zane leave, but then again, she wouldn't. Not if he didn't want her to. It was harder this time than when they'd parted before. Back then, she could still dream, still imagine that they had a chance at a life together. But now she had no such illusions.

The sheets felt cold and she shivered, remembering she was naked except for the throw still wrapped around her. She knew she should move, and she would, just as soon as she gathered enough strength.

A rustling sound near the end of the bed made her pry one of her eyelids open. Zane was standing there, magnificently naked, watching her. She blinked and opened both her eyes to make certain she wasn't hallucinating.

"Be sure, Sophia. There is no going back once this is begun." He seemed grim, almost angry. Certainly not happy about what was about to happen.

"Are you sure?" The last thing she wanted was to be in a relationship with a reluctant man. It was bad enough with a regular guy, but an immortal vampire? They'd have a long time to learn to resent one another if this wasn't what he wanted.

"How can you even ask me that?"

She shrugged and then sighed, knowing that he needed to know something of her past. It was only fair, considering how much she knew about him. She patted the mattress next to her. He eyed her so warily, she almost laughed as he gingerly lowered himself to sit beside her.

"I didn't have a great childhood." Now that was an understatement.

The change of subject didn't faze him at all. "I know." Those two words made her frown.

"Just how much do you know?"

Zane shrugged. "I did some basic research before I first approached you."

Of course he had. How could she have missed that? The man was a cop, for crying out loud. He would never have knocked on her door until he knew everything there was to know about her.

She licked her dry lips, but plowed forward. "Then you know that my mother was a prostitute and I have no idea who my father is."

He nodded, his eyes almost sad. "I saw a copy of your birth certificate."

Sophia swallowed hard, hating the feeling of vulnerability that slipped over her. The taunts from her childhood rose up, threatening to choke her. She cleared her throat and forged onward. "It wasn't so bad. My mom, well, she was never good at managing money or taking care of details like groceries and bills. That was my job once I got old enough."

Zane reached out and brushed a lock of hair from her forehead. "You don't have to tell me any more. I can feel your pain."

"No. You need to hear it and I need to say it." She absently leaned her head into his caress as he continued to stroke her hair. "I ran away when I was fifteen, almost sixteen. One of my mother's boyfriends tried to rape me." Her fingers clutched at the blanket. "I've never told that to another living soul."

Zane's hand froze in mid-stroke. "What happened?" Sophia could feel his growing rage shimmering just below the surface.

"I told my mother. She told me that it was time for me to grow up and earn my keep. I packed my stuff and left on the next bus out of town."

"How did you survive?" Zane's hands were clenched into fists in his lap and his green eyes were dark with pain.

"Food banks, shelters, stuff like that." It had been the most horrible and frightening time of her life, and one she didn't want to dwell on. "The point is that I survived and grew stronger. I'm okay with being alone. I've been on my own my entire life." Lifting her hand, she cupped his face and smiled. "But I don't want to be alone any longer. It's not that I can't live without you. I can. It's that I want to be with you."

Zane scooped her into his arms, hugging her so tight that she could barely breathe. There was a desperation to his embrace that she didn't quite understand. "I wish I could change your childhood."

"I don't." She snuggled closer to him, resting her ear over his heart. "The events of my life brought me to this exact moment and I wouldn't change anything if it meant that I might not meet you."

He leaned her back against his arm and she shivered, missing his body heat. He tucked the blanket tighter around her. "You humble me."

She wanted to wipe the worry from his brow, but yawned instead. "I'm sorry."

His smile was filled with tenderness. "Don't be sorry. You're so much stronger than even you know. You might be able to live without me, but I cannot live without you. I

have learned much of my family history this past month and I know with a certainty that you are the only woman I will ever love."

Sophia struggled to sit up. "Truly?"

He nodded. "That's why I am afraid of converting you. At least if you remain human I can watch out for you and love you for as long as you live. When you die, I would seek death as well."

"No," she cried, her hands clutching at his shoulders. She couldn't bear to think about his death.

"Yes." His lips thinned and she could see the muscles working along his jaw as he clenched it. She sensed that his will was implacable, at least when it came to this. "My other choice is to leave you, watching you from afar and keeping you from harm."

"I don't like that choice any better," she grumbled.

"No, I didn't think you would." She could hear the underlying humor in his voice and it irritated her.

"There is another choice."

"There is." He hesitated. "You are willing to risk everything to be with me for eternity. How can I do any less for you?"

Happiness began to fill her. She could see it in his eyes. He was really going to attempt it. Now that the moment was at hand, her stomach began to flutter and she began to sweat, but she was determined on her course of action. "Do it."

"Are you aware of what happens?"

Sophia shrugged. "I might have asked Delight and Laurel Rose about their experience." She glanced at him, trying to gauge his reaction. She didn't want to say anything to dissuade him at this point, now that she was so close to getting what she wanted. "I'll admit that I'm not looking forward to heaving up my guts and writhing around in pain, but I'll get over it."

His hands framed her face as he leaned down and kissed her forehead. "You are truly a gift and I promise that I will always do my best to make you happy."

"I'll remind you of that when you're pissed off at me about something." He chuckled, as she'd hoped he would, breaking some of the tension. "Okay, how do we do this?"

He lifted her away from him and knelt up on the bed. "This is your choice, so you must come to me." She reached out and caressed the side of his face and his neck, wanting—no, needing—to touch him. His shaft was hard and ready for her. How she'd missed that, she didn't know, but there was certainly no mistaking his arousal.

Tossing aside the blanket, she came up onto her knees and crawled toward him. He was so big and strong, but he looked so alone sitting there. They belonged together and she had to believe that everything would work out all right. Still, she hesitated. "If something happens and this doesn't go exactly as planned, promise me that you'll kill

me immediately. That is, if I'm not already dead. I don't want to live if I turn into a crazed killer."

Zane's face contorted in pain and she knew that he was thinking of his parents and the years that they'd both lived in torment. "I promise."

Rubbing her damp palms over her thighs, she shifted closer to him, lifting her leg to straddle his lap. His arms came around her immediately, his hands sliding under her bottom to support her. Leaning forward, she nuzzled the hair on his chest before finding his flat nipple and flicking it with her tongue. He groaned, his fingers digging into her butt as he lifted her higher.

The bulbous head of his cock nudged against her moist slit. She squirmed to try to take him deeper, but he held her easily, not allowing himself to sink farther. Sophia raised her head and stared at him.

"You are my heart and my soul. I will protect you with my entire being for as long as you shall live and beyond. I will love you forever, Sophia." There was a ritualistic quality to his words. They were a vow to her and one that she knew he would keep.

Sophia had never trusted anyone in her life. In her experience, people let you down when you needed them. But not Zane. She knew he'd die before he'd break his word to her. He would always be there for her. "I love you, Zane. You are my heart and my soul," she repeated the vow he'd made to her. "I will protect you for as long as you live and beyond. Now, take me. Make me yours so we can be together forever."

With a cry, he pulled her down, impaling her with his cock. She arched back as he filled her almost to the point of pain. He seemed even larger than before. As if sensing her discomfort, he started to pull back. Sophia forestalled him by wrapping her legs around him.

"Sophia." Her name was a plea, a promise, a prayer that he continued to chant as he cupped her face in his hands and kissed her. His lips were gentle as they brushed hers. He always tasted so good, like a fine brandy. When she parted her lips his tongue surged inward, staking claim to her mouth.

She lost track of time as he kissed her. His cock throbbed within her and her inner muscles responded until they were pulsing in rhythm together. Her nipples ached, so she rubbed them over the hard planes of his chest. Her nails dug into his shoulders as she clung to him, half afraid that he'd change his mind and leave her.

He dragged his lips from hers and trailed a line of kisses along her cheek and down her jaw. She tilted her head to one side, offering her neck to him. The tension between them was palpable—a combination of lust, love and fear that was almost overwhelming.

"Do it." Gripping his hair, she tugged his mouth toward her neck. She could feel his hesitation and pulled harder. "If you love me, do it."

A low growl came from deep in his chest as his teeth sank into her flesh. Lightning flashed through her body, flowing from her neck down to her breasts and settling low

in her pussy. Need flowed, demanding to be satisfied. Lust poured through her veins, desperate to be sated.

She began to move, unable to stop herself, lifting her hips and lowering them again. Zane gripped her ass once again and took over, guiding her up and down his shaft, driving himself impossibly deep with each thrust. He continued to suck at her neck, drinking in her blood.

He made a sound of frustration and shifted, lifting her and bending forward until she was flat on her back with him looming over her. His hips began to hammer at her, harder and harder. She arched as close as she could, taking each thrust. Her body was on fire, her feminine muscles quivering. She opened her mouth to call out his name, but nothing came out. She came on a soundless cry that was torn from her very soul.

Her body convulsed as pleasure unlike anything she'd ever experienced rocketed through her. But she was getting weaker by the second. Her legs and arms fell to the mattress. She opened her eyes, desperate for one final glimpse of Zane, but all she could see was his bare shoulder as he continued to drink from her. His hips continued to pump and then his body tensed. She could feel him pumping his seed, hot and deep within her, flooding her with his essence. He shuddered but didn't stop feeding.

Reaching her hand up, she tried to touch him. She barely managed to stroke his soft, dark hair before her hand flopped back to the bed. Darkness pulled at her and she knew that this was the moment of truth. Closing her eyes, she embraced her death, knowing it was the only way to be reborn into Zane's world.

Zane shuddered as he felt the last breath of life leave Sophia. His body was alive, flooded with the aftermath of their explosive orgasms and with the overload of Sophia's rich blood. He pulled out of her and hauled her into his arms. Sophia had become his heart and soul. She *would* drink from him. He would allow no other outcome. One of his fingernails elongated as he sat cross-legged on the bed, cradling her limp form against him.

Dragging his sharp nail over his flesh just above his heart, he made a deep cut. Blood immediately gushed forward. He tugged her close, placing her lips over the cut and angling his body so that his blood pooled in her mouth.

It overflowed, seeping out of the corners of her mouth and ran down her cheeks like a torrent of red tears. "Drink, Sophia," he demanded. "Drink." He rubbed his fingers over her throat, desperately trying to get her to swallow. "No." In a panic now, he shook her, dislodging her mouth from him. Blood flowed unchecked over his chest, but he was blind to everything but the limp woman in his arms.

Gripping her closer, he prayed as he hadn't done in years. He pleaded and begged with Sophia as he positioned her mouth against his chest once again. "You have to drink, my love. You have to live for both of us."

When that didn't work, he changed tactics, yelling at her. "This is your fault. You wanted this. You can't die." He searched desperately for any movement, a twitch of her eyes, a jerk of her fingers.

Nothing.

Fear unlike anything he'd ever known filled him. Tears fell unheeded from his eyes as he began to plead with her again. They dripped from his face and fell onto Sophia's cheeks, mixing with the blood that stained her beautiful face.

Finally, he gave up.

"So be it." Leaning down, he brushed his lips against her pale, cool ones, wanting to taste them one more time. He'd hold her in his arms until the sun rose and then he would join her in death, allowing the deadly rays to destroy him.

"I love you, Sophia Daring York." He added his name to hers because, in his mind, they were married, more than married. They were mates for life and beyond, and even death would not change that.

As the last word left his lips, she gasped and began to choke. "Sophia!" he yelled as he sat her up and rubbed her throat, her arms, her back. "Drink," he commanded, infusing every ounce of power into his voice.

Her mouth latched onto his chest and she began to suck. This time his tears were ones of joy as he cradled her close. Tilting back his head, he tried to stem their flow. When he felt she'd had enough, he gently eased her away. "Enough." She whimpered, but didn't protest as he commanded her to drag her tongue over the wound on his chest, closing it.

Sophia's eyes fluttered open and she smiled weakly at him. Then her eyelids drooped once again and she drifted off to sleep. Zane sat there beside her for more than an hour, simply watching the slow rise and fall of her chest, almost afraid to stop watching for fear it might stop.

Finally, he forced himself to get up and carry her to the living room where he laid her gently on the sofa. Hurrying to the bathroom, he soaked a cloth in warm water and returned to her side. She hadn't stirred. Taking his time, he began to clean the dried blood from her face and neck. Over and over, he returned to the bathroom to rinse the cloth, until all the blood was gone.

That done, he went back into the bedroom and stripped the sheets. It took him a few minutes to find another set, but he finally discovered them in an armoire at the end of the hallway. When he'd remade the bed, he returned to the living room and lifted Sophia into his arms. She made a soft snuffling sound and snuggled close to his warmth.

He carried her into bed and tucked her beneath the covers, sitting next to her until she settled. Then he grabbed the blanket he'd found in the armoire and tucked it over the curtain rod to add a layer of protection against the sun that would rise within the hour. One final walk through the apartment assured him that everything was as it should be. He latched all the locks on her door before joining her back in the bedroom.

Crawling into bed beside her, he eased her into his arms, loving the way she instinctively turned toward him and rested her head on his chest. She draped one of her arms over his stomach and a leg across his thighs, blanketing him with her body.

Contentment filled him and he found himself smiling for no reason as he closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep. Sophia was his. Now and forever.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Sophia came awake in a rush as her stomach threatened to spew its meager contents. She gulped in air, rolling to her side, but it didn't help. A large male hand gently rubbed the small of her back, but even that slight pressure was too much.

"I'm going to be sick," she gasped out as she threw back the covers. Zane grabbed her, all but dragging her into the bathroom. Sweat broke out on her brow as she concentrated on not tossing her cookies too soon. She scrambled out of his arms, falling to the floor in front of the toilet. Then she got violently ill.

She was aware of Zane hovering behind her as her stomach cramped continuously, forcing her to rid her body of God only knows what. She wasn't sure she wanted to know. As if he'd heard her thoughts, he leaned close. "Your body has to rid itself of human toxins."

She nodded, or she thought she did. Maybe she didn't. It was hard to concentrate in her weakened state. She swayed against the porcelain and Zane knelt behind her so that his chest was against her back. He wrapped his arms around her, encouraging her to lean back against him in between times when she was sick. He wiped the sweat from her face and neck and the cool cloth felt wonderful against her heated skin. She tilted her head to one side, resting it on his shoulder as he drew the soft washcloth over her brow.

"Sorry." This wasn't exactly the best way to start a...well, she wasn't quite sure what to call what they had. They weren't exactly going steady, nor were they married. What they had was more intense than either of those things.

Another wave of nausea rocked through her and she spent the next ten minutes being sick again. She had no idea how much time passed as she was sick over and over again. At one point, she thought she heard Zane on his cell phone, although when and how he managed to get it, she had no idea. He was practically yelling at the person on the other end, demanding to know how long she would be sick. He was probably talking to his cousins.

She wanted to reassure him that she'd be all right, but she didn't have the strength. Later. She'd reassure him later. When she finally felt she was through being sick, she raised her head and managed one word. "Shower." She felt sticky and dirty and wanted to feel clean.

She was lifted off the floor and he sat her on the small bathroom counter, propping her against the wall. "Will you be all right while I get the water going?" She nodded and then regretted it when her temples began to throb. She raised her hand to her forehead and groaned.

He was back in a flash and since they were both already naked, he picked her up and walked straight into the shower with her. The heat from the water felt heavenly, but the pulse from the spray was almost more than her over-sensitized skin could bear. She tried to bat the water away with her hands, whimpering as it continued to pummel her flesh.

Zane swore and then shifted, taking the brunt of the spray on his back. Sophia sighed and relaxed, content to just be in his arms. Her stomach muscles ached. In fact, her entire body was one large ache. She felt as if someone had taken a baseball bat to her.

She smelled her soap and then felt the light brushing of Zane's hands over her face, neck and chest. He held her easily with one arm as he awkwardly washed her with the other. "Let me stand up." She wanted to be totally clean.

He was hesitant, but did as she asked. "Let me know if it's too much for you," he murmured as he helped her lean against the wall. When he was sure she was steady, he quickly and efficiently washed and rinsed her, cupping water in his hands to trickle over her soapy body. There was nothing even remotely sexual in his touch, but still her body responded to him, tightening in some places and softening in others. What she did feel flowing from him was love and caring and something even deeper. It was as if they were now two halves of a whole, finally joined together.

The water stopped and, the next thing she knew, a large towel was wrapped around her. "So tired." She tried to keep her eyes open, but it was next to impossible. Her eyelids felt as if they had weights attached to them. All she wanted to do was sleep.

"I know, my love." She felt the deep rumble of his voice all the way to her toes. She honestly decided that she would have to be dead not to want this man. Even as horrible as she felt, she was still drawn to him in a way that defied definition.

The softness of her pillow met her face and she realized that he'd dried her body and was putting her back to bed. He crawled in behind her, carefully lifting her so that she was tucked into the protective curve of his large body.

Content, she snuggled closer. The hard ridge of his erection pressed against her behind. Sophia was smiling when she drifted off to sleep.

The next time she woke, it was night again. She realized that she knew that without even opening her eyes. It was if she was in tune with the night in a way she'd never been before. Made sense when she thought about it. It was a handy skill for a vampire to be able to tell how much time was left before the dawn without having to depend on a watch.

Very carefully, she opened her eyes, blinking to help them adjust. It took her a second to realize that she was seeing everything perfectly even though the lights weren't on. "This is cool."

A male chuckle came from close to her ear. "What's cool?"

She rolled over and faced Zane, who was watching her with an indulgent expression. "I can see in the dark."

He reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Of course you can, my love. I can see the red of your hair, the pale green of your inquisitive eyes and the creaminess of your pale skin."

His words lured her closer. "What else can I do?"

"All your senses will be more acute. Listen." As she did so, she rapidly became aware of the myriad sounds surrounding them. The plunk of the water dripping from the bathroom taps, the roar of the traffic on the street, the snores of the people in the apartment below. She covered her ears with her hands. It was too much. Zane was right there, locking her in his embrace. "Concentrate, Sophia. You can block it all out. Just pretend your mind is a radio and you're turning down the sound." It sounded like a silly thing to do, but she did it anyway and damned if it didn't work.

As the cacophony of sound died away, she tilted her head up so she could see him. "Thank you."

"You're very welcome. There will be much for you to learn over the next few months."

"Can we change into bats like in the movies?" She wasn't so sure that she wanted to know.

Zane laughed and she stared, struck by how much younger he appeared. The lines of strain that usually bracketed his mouth and eyes seemed less pronounced. "No," he chuckled. "We cannot become bats." Before she could heave a sigh of relief, he continued. "But we can shift into wolves and the rare vampire can even become an owl."

She thought about that for a second. "That's okay."

"I'm glad you approve." She could sense that he was suppressing more laughter, but she didn't mind. It was so unusual to see him this happy. If she was the cause of it, then she was glad.

Sophia stared at Zane, becoming more aware of him by the second. His big body exuded heat and the most intoxicating scent. Leaning forward, she sniffed his neck, letting her lips graze down his jugular vein. Her tongue snaked out to taste him and she savored his salty flavor.

He groaned but did nothing to stop her. Her body was quickly heating up as well. Her skin felt flushed and her sex creamed with growing need. Her pussy began to throb, clenching and unclenching as her desire heightened. She wanted this man and she wanted him now.

Pushing him onto his back, she crawled on top of his stomach. His brilliant emerald-green eyes were glowing in the dark and there was no mistaking the lust that filled them to overflowing. She licked her lips and laughed when his gaze followed the track of her tongue.

Reaching up, he cupped her breasts in his palms, dragging his thumbs over her puckered nipples. She whimpered as they tightened even further. She rubbed her pussy

against the hard planes of his belly, trying to ease the growing ache within her. Cream from her body slid down to coat his skin, making her slide more easily.

Her fingernails dug into his chest as she arched into his hands. She wanted...something. Her gums throbbed and then she felt them. Jerking back, she almost fell off Zane as two sharp fangs extended downward.

"You need to feed, my love." She was frightened by how much she wanted to lower herself and just bite his neck. As if he sensed her uncertainty, he shifted his hands onto her back, soothing her as he drew her down onto his chest. "It is perfectly normal and nothing to fear."

She'd have to take his word for that. The hunger within her was expanding. She could hear the heavy beat of his heart and the whoosh of his blood as it pumped through his veins. "Don't let me hurt you." She still wasn't sure that she was in control of this vampire thing."

"You won't," he promised.

Taking him at his word, she nuzzled his neck. God, he smelled delicious. Opening her mouth, she sucked on his skin. He groaned and cupped the back of her head, holding her to him. Her fangs slid easily through his flesh, piercing it quickly. The first gush of blood caught her off guard and she choked.

Then the taste exploded in her mouth. Sweet, vital and better than chocolate. All the cells of her body were crying out for it, so she drank. Each pull of her mouth on his neck was echoed deep in her pussy. The more she swallowed, the more aroused she became.

Zane slipped his fingers between her thighs and began to stroke the slick folds of her pussy. She moved against his fingers, wanting to come. Needing to come. His thumb grazed her clitoris and without warning, she exploded, her body convulsing. She raised her head, yelling her release. It was intense and quick, and when it was over, she collapsed against his chest.

"Lick the puncture wounds to close them."

She raised her head enough to see the dribbles of blood seeping from his neck. Embarrassment filled her. "Sorry about that."

He growled like a contented bear. "There is no need for you to be sorry about anything, or embarrassed either."

She realized that he could sense her feelings as well. She wondered if she was more in tune with his. She'd been so caught up in the changes in her own body that she hadn't tried. Concentrating, she was struck by the blast of lust and need that radiated from him. How the heck had she missed that? And if she'd needed visual clues, the erection poking her in the stomach was a dead giveaway. But mixed with the lust were feelings of intense love and pride. She blinked back tears that threatened to spill. No one had ever loved her this way before, or been proud of her just because she was herself and for no other reason.

Levering herself up on her hands, she kissed him. His tongue snaked into her mouth, tasting the blood that she'd drunk from him. It should have been disgusting.

Instead, it was highly erotic and although she'd just climaxed, her body was crying out for his.

He rolled suddenly, reversing their positions so that he was looming above her. "Now it's my turn." She shivered, but it certainly wasn't with fear. "I want to claim you in every way possible." She knew what he was asking without his having to say so. There was only one way that he hadn't taken her. She nodded. His nostrils flared and she sensed his growing excitement. "Are you sure?" he asked as he cupped the side of her face.

"Yes." There was no doubt in her mind that she wanted this as much as he did.

He rolled away from her and grabbed a white tube from the bedside table. She raised an eyebrow in question. He just grinned. "I bought a few supplies, just in case."

Sophia laughed, unable to help herself. He looked so pleased with himself. Her grin faded as his gaze darkened. His eyes seemed to devour her as they roamed over her nude body. Rather than feeling shy, she felt wanton. Her thighs parted and she rolled her hips upward in invitation. She cupped her breasts with her hands and tweaked her nipples with her thumb and forefinger, groaning as the pleasure shot straight to her pussy.

"On your hands and knees." His guttural growl sent more heat raging through her veins. Hunger beat at Sophia's body. She wanted him to fuck her and she wanted him to take her blood. The idea that she could feed him with her blood while pleasuring him with her body excited her unbearably. She licked her lips, already wanting to drink from him again.

"Sophia," he growled again. She rolled over, coming up on her hands and knees. She could picture what he wanted in her mind. Whether she was reading his thoughts or he was feeding them to her, she wasn't sure. But it didn't matter. The images were raw and erotic.

Lowering her forehead to her pillow, she pushed her ass into the air. Reaching behind her, she grabbed the cheeks of her butt and spread them wide, exposing herself totally to him. "Is this what you had in mind?" She barely recognized the sensual purr as her own voice. She felt sexy and powerful and totally wanton.

"Oh, yeah. That's perfect." His finger traced the dark cleft of her behind, leaving a slick trail of a gel-type substance. He rimmed the puckered opening before pressing the tip of his finger inward. It was tight, but it didn't hurt, even as he pushed it deeper. The thick coating of gel allowed it to slide into her fairly easily.

She pushed her behind toward him. "More."

"So demanding." She could hear his pleasure as he pressed a second finger in to join the first. This was harder and the pressure began to make her ass burn. She groaned and he stilled. She didn't want him to stop.

"No. Don't stop." She panted, trying to make her body relax, knowing it would make it easier on both of them.

Her entire body jerked as he lightly scraped his teeth over her ass. At the same time, he drove his fingers deeper. This time, they both groaned. Zane nipped at her behind as he slid his other hand forward, fingering the slick folds of her pussy. But his featherlike touches weren't enough.

"Stop teasing me."

"But you're such fun to tease." His thumb grazed her clitoris and she cried out. Cream slipped down her thighs. The ripe smell of sex and need permeated the air around them.

"Fuck me, Zane." She bucked back against him. Every nerve ending was tingling, every muscle in her body clenched. She needed him inside her. Nothing else could sate the hunger burning in her body, indeed, in her very soul.

His fingers slid from her ass and she almost cried out at the loss. Then he was behind her and she could feel the blunt head of his shaft probing at the tight entrance. He pushed the slick tip past the taut muscles and then stopped. They were both breathing hard now. This was a lot different than having two fingers inside her. He was wide and thick and she wasn't sure she could take him.

"Yes, you can," he murmured. "Now that you are changed, you can take me much more easily than if you were still human. Your body will accommodate mine much more quickly." He flexed his hips and his cock slid forward. Sophia sucked in a breath. It burned and hurt slightly, but it felt so good too. Zane started moving then, ever-so slightly. He rocked gently backward and forward, pressing himself deeper with each forward motion. Time didn't matter to either of them. Nothing existed but the two of them and how this was making both of them feel.

Zane continued to touch her, stroking the folds of her pussy and her clitoris, sliding his fingers into her slit and then withdrawing again. The heat within her was like a fever burning out of control. Every molecule of her body was focused on reaching climax. She felt poised on the edge, unable to go over. "Now, Zane. Don't make me wait any longer."

It was like releasing a whirlwind. Zane began to flex his hips slightly harder and faster, withdrawing farther before pushing himself deep. He thrust three fingers into her pussy, and began to fuck her with them. She felt filled to overflowing with Zane. And she loved it.

The hard press of his cock as it squeezed into her ass, the way the muscles relaxed and contracted around it was the most erotic sensation she'd ever felt. "Harder," she begged.

His hips hammered harder, his strokes shortening. His balls slammed against her sensitive folds with each heavy thrust. His fingers toyed with her cunt and his thumb brushed her clitoris.

"Come for me, Sophia. Now."

She wanted to protest that she couldn't come on command, but her body reacted immediately. Everything within her tightened and then let go. Convulsions shook her. Cream flooded her pussy and she automatically squeezed her ass muscles tight.

Zane yelled as he pumped himself into her. She felt the hot flood of cum and the heavy pulse of his cock deep within her as he came, sending shivers of sensation back through her own body.

He eased his fingers from her pussy and she shook. She didn't know how much more she could take. Then he leaned over her and scraped his teeth over the sensitive nape of her neck. She tilted her head to one side.

"I love you, Sophia," he whispered as he sank his fangs deep. Her body arched as if it had been hit by a jolt of electricity. Her pussy tightened and she felt another orgasm overtake her. She was nothing but feeling and sensation as Zane drank from her.

It wasn't long enough, yet it was almost too much. So many conflicting sensations filled Sophia as Zane retracted his fangs and licked her neck. Then he eased his cock from her ass. She cried out.

"Fuck," he muttered.

"I thought you just did that," she managed to quip.

He chuckled and flopped to the mattress beside her. Her legs slowly sank to the bed and she groaned. "I'm going to be stiff and sore."

His large hand patted her behind. "Now that you're a vampire, you'll heal faster. A nap and you'll be as good as new."

"Really?" She turned her head so that she could see him. His hair was plastered to his forehead and looked totally debauched.

"Really. And you look totally debauched too, by the way."

He was reading her thoughts again. Self-consciously, she swiped at the hair sticking to her forehead.

Zane grabbed her hand and kissed her fingertips. "And you look totally beautiful." He stared at her for so long, his gaze so somber that she began to get worried. "Thank you, Sophia. You've made my life whole with your courage and your love. You are mine now. For forever and beyond."

Tears pricked her eyes, but she blinked them back. She didn't want to cry. Now was a time for celebration. "Forever." She batted her eyelashes at him and smiled coyly. "A quick nap, you said."

As she'd hoped, he laughed. "I've created a monster."

"No, not a monster. Just a woman who loves you."

He brushed the curve of her jaw with his hand, tilting it upward. "Maybe that nap can wait."

Just before his lips touched hers, she whispered. "Maybe it can."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Sophia fidgeted as they headed up the walkway toward Lucian's house. It had been several days since her conversion and Zane had received a phone call almost as soon as they'd opened their eyes tonight, practically demanding a command appearance in front of the family. He'd seemed more bemused by it than anything. Neither of them had ever had much family to talk about, so this was new territory for them both. Sophia wasn't sure if she liked it or not, but she had the feeling that now that the Dalakis family had claimed them, there would be no escape.

As always, the door opened before they had a chance to knock. The man standing there was not one she recognized, but he looked familiar enough that she knew that this must be the eldest brother, Cristofor. His green eyes examined her from head to toe and she could feel Zane bristling beside her.

Down, boy. She could tell she'd startled Zane, which pleased her greatly. She was rapidly getting the hang of all her new powers, including being able to communicate telepathically with him.

Cristofor transferred his gaze to Zane. "It is good to see you again, cousin. I see you have brought your woman."

This time it was her turn to bristle, but before she could say anything a woman appeared in the doorway behind Cristofor. "Oh for heaven's sake, let them in." As Sophia watched in awe, the woman with short brown hair and golden-brown eyes shoved the large vampire aside and held out her hand. "Hi, I'm Johanna, Cristofor's wife."

Sophia liked the calm stare and forthright manner of the other woman. Delight and Laurel Rose had had nothing but wonderful things to say about their sister-in-law. She held out her hand. "Sophia Daring."

Johanna tucked Sophia's hand into the crook of her arm and led her past the men and into the house. Sophia's stomach fluttered slightly as her nerves got the better of her again. She glanced over her shoulder and calmed when she saw that Zane was right behind her, his eyes narrowed as if he didn't like the separation any more than she did.

The library was crowded, but Sophia knew almost everyone there. Laurel Rose was curled up on a cozy sofa with Stefan sprawled lazily beside her. Delight and Lucian stood in front of the fireplace talking with a young man. That must be Delight's younger brother, she reasoned, noting that his hair coloring was similar to Delight's.

Sam Cassidy was seated in a high-backed chair with Blythe in his lap. Obviously, there had been a change in that relationship over the past month. Blythe smiled and waved as they walked in. Sophia could hardly believe the change in the other woman.

She positively radiated happiness and there was a contentment surrounding Cassidy that hadn't been there before.

All eyes turned toward them as Johanna led her farther into the room. Sophia found herself staring at the antique furniture, the books in the shelves lining the walls, the artwork scattered around. Anywhere but at the rest of them. Johanna patted her arm and then abandoned her to her fate. Knowing she was being cowardly, she squared her shoulders and faced them.

A strong arm slipped around her waist and she was pulled back against a familiar hard chest. Sighing, she felt his strength surrounding her both physically and mentally. She could get through anything with Zane beside her.

She turned to Stefan and Laurel Rose. "I'm sorry about what happened." No need to mention what night she was talking about. They all knew. "I want to thank you again for putting your lives at risk to save me. I don't want you to think that I didn't appreciate it, but I had to send you away that night and make sure you stayed away. I didn't mean to seem ungrateful."

"Of course you didn't. We never thought anything of the sort." Laurel Rose's immediate and obviously sincere response went a long way to settling Sophia's nerves.

Stefan strode toward her, looking big and menacing, yet she wasn't afraid. "You were only trying to protect us, which is hard for a simple male mind to comprehend. It is our nature to protect and we don't take it well when those under our care put themselves in danger to shield us." He brushed the side of her face with his hand. "I may not approve of what you did, but I understand why you did it."

Sophia burst out laughing at his display of masculine arrogance. The corners of Stefan's mouth turned upward. "I can see that you do not appreciate my thoughtful discourse on the subject." He glanced over at Laurel Rose. "Surprisingly, neither did my wife."

Laurel Rose came over to stand beside her husband and was immediately enveloped in his embrace. "You'll have to forgive them, Sophia. They're very old-fashioned in their ways, but we love them anyway."

Sophia blushed. She hadn't meant to laugh at Stefan, but really, what else was a modern woman supposed to do? And she really did appreciate the way that the men all wanted to protect her. "I didn't mean to laugh." She chuckled when Stefan cocked his eyebrow. "Okay, so I did mean to laugh, but I do appreciate what you did for me." It was time to finish the rest of it. She faced the whole room. "I'm sorry for not contacting any of you since that night. It's not that I didn't want to. It's just that I didn't feel as if I had the right to. I'm not a member of this family. You barely know me at all."

Cristofor stepped forward, his mere presence instantly commanding every eye in the room. "You risked your life to protect this family."

"But I'm still not a blood relative."

He stared down his nose, glaring at her. "I see you have been speaking with Zane and Cassidy."

Now she was totally lost. "I don't understand."

Cristofor sighed as if pained. "Zane is our cousin. There is a blood link to our family, and even if there was not, it would not matter." He whirled around to pin Cassidy with his glare. Cassidy just crossed his booted feet at the ankles and glared back. "Cassidy has become a member of our family as well. There is no blood tie there, but it does not matter. We are brothers in spirit. Brothers in blood. And you as Zane's chosen mate have the right to all our protection, all our caring."

Sophia was totally overwhelmed by Cristofor's words. She could feel the sincerity and the force of his proclamation. He really meant it. For a woman who'd never been able to depend on anyone in her past, her life had certainly changed in such a short time, and definitely for the better.

Zane cleared his throat. "I appreciate everything that you've done for me this past month. All of you."

Lucian smiled. "It is our pleasure. Our family is not so large that we can afford to lose a single member. You are both welcome in our home and we look forward to spending time with you both."

Delight was more effusive as she hugged Sophia. With Zane at her back and Delight at her front, she found herself sandwiched briefly between the two of them. "I'm so glad that we're going to be sisters."

Sophia licked her suddenly dry lips. Marriage wasn't something that she and Zane had discussed. "Ah..." She trailed off, not quite knowing how to explain the situation, but Delight was astute and seemed to grasp the situation immediately.

Propping her hands on her hips, Delight shook her head at Zane. "These men think that claiming us is enough. You've got to let them know that you want a wedding. You do, don't you?"

Once again, all eyes were on her. Sophia was beginning to rethink the whole idea of family.

"Sophia?" Zane turned her so that she was facing him. She could see the concern in his eyes and tried to smile and shrug it off.

"We can talk about this later."

But Zane was stubborn and shook his head. "We will talk about it now."

"Uh-oh," someone said behind her. She thought it might be Delight.

"Later," she said from between clenched teeth. The man was embarrassing her in front of his family. She'd kick him in the shins except that would only make things worse.

He cupped her face gently in his hands and stared down at her with such love that her irritation immediately faded. "The connection that we have transcends what mortals share. It goes deeper and is more profound. It is for all eternity. No ceremony could make me feel more bonded to you. That is done." He smoothed his thumbs over her brow, trying to wipe away her frown lines. "But if a wedding will make you feel

more secure, then it is my duty to provide one." His grip on her tightened as she stiffened. "And my pleasure to give it to you." He paused and she could feel the tension radiating through him. "Will you marry me?"

Speech was impossible. If she tried to say anything, she'd probably burst into tears, so she nodded instead. Zane swooped down and kissed her. Their mouths melded together, their lips parting and their tongues mating. Sophia could hear the vague sounds of congratulations in the background, but even that faded under the onslaught of Zane's kiss. Now that they were so connected, she could feel his love and lust as it poured into her. She returned it to him, adding her own emotions to the mix. Her breasts began to ache and she felt the familiar dampness between her thighs.

Someone cleared their throat. Loudly. Zane pulled back from their kiss but didn't release her. He smoothed her swollen bottom lip with his thumb. "I forgot where we were."

"So did I." Her voice was low and raspy, a seductive purr. She cleared her throat and turned to the waiting crowd. She could feel the heat of embarrassment on her cheeks, but she didn't care. She was too happy to care. "We're getting married."

The men hugged her, offering their congratulations, but the women dragged her away from Zane, hugging her over and over as they excitedly began to chatter about wedding plans. Even Blythe joined them and Sophia realized that she was totally relaxed around the vampires now. As if she felt Sophia's perusal, Blythe offered her a smile. "You're one of them now too, aren't you?"

Sophia nodded. "Yes, I am."

"So Cassidy and I are the only humans in the bunch."

"Along with Chase," Delight added, motioning to her younger brother who stood talking with the men. "But you are still part of our family."

"I'm finally beginning to believe that. Sam and I are getting married." She glanced over at him and quickly away. It was strange to hear Cassidy referred to by his first name, but it sounded right coming from Blythe. "He doesn't know it yet. I haven't told him. But I will. Soon. Maybe after you and Zane are married. I think one wedding at a time is enough."

"That's wonderful news, Blythe. And I'm glad that you're okay." She hesitated, but then continued. "Zane told me everything that happened."

For a moment a shadow appeared in Blythe's eyes, but it quickly disappeared. "I'm just glad it's finally over. And I'm glad that you're okay."

"I am sorry about not contacting any of you over the past month, but I just couldn't. Not with things so uncertain between Zane and myself." She really liked these women, but never having had female friends before, she wasn't sure how these things worked.

"Totally understandable." Delight took her hand and squeezed. "Our men aren't the easiest in the world to understand and sometimes they'll drive you crazy." Her gaze softened as she glanced over at her husband. As if Lucian felt it, he looked up and sent a smile to Delight that would curl any woman's toes. Delight cleared her throat and

looked away. "As I was saying, they'll drive you crazy some days, but you'll never find a man who will love you more."

"I know." Sophia was unable to resist finding Zane with her eyes. He was staring at her and she could feel the brush of his emotions in her mind. *Later.* The whisper of a promise flitted through her mind along with a highly erotic image of both of them naked and entwined in her bed.

Later. She sent the thought winging back to him with a few images of her own. She felt her body heating up under the intensity of his gaze.

"Earth to Sophia." Laurel Rose laughed as she tugged on Sophia's arm, a knowing look on her face. "Save that for later. Right now we have a wedding to plan."

Zane watched the women as they gathered around Sophia, laughing and chattering, accepting her in their midst. "Thank you." His cousins, as well as Cassidy and even Chase were gathered around him. As one, the men turned to glance over at the women.

"We did nothing." Cristofor was the first to look away from the ladies.

Zane sensed Sophia's gaze on him and sent her an image of what he wanted to do to her later tonight. He could feel her growing arousal. His satisfaction was short-lived when she sent an image back at him and his jeans were suddenly way too tight. To distract himself, he forced himself to look away and concentrate on the conversation around him. "What you have done is not nothing. You've accepted both me and my mate into your homes and your lives."

"It is our pleasure." Lucian smiled. "And it is not as if we had a choice. The women would have it no other way."

Zane knew that his cousin would have it no other way either, but as men they were not as comfortable saying such things aloud. "If I ever caused your family any stress due to my investigations, I am sorry. But after what happened within my own family, I could not trust anyone until I knew for certain you were sane and not monsters like my own father became."

"That is understandable, but it is all behind us now." Cristofor spoke as if that was the end it. And Zane supposed it was. Everyone knew the truth. There were no more secrets amongst them.

"Congratulations, cousin Zane." Chase held out his hand. The young man intrigued Zane. He'd spent quite a bit of time with him the past month that he and Sophia had spent apart. Levelheaded and incredibly artistic, he seemed to have no problem accepting the fact that his sister and all his in-laws and extended family were vampires.

"Thank you." He'd barely released Chase's hand when Cassidy extended his.

"That's a fine woman you've got there, York." Their hands clasped. "I now consider her under my protection as well."

Zane nodded formally. "I extend the same to your woman." There was no doubt in Zane's mind that Cassidy and Blythe were meant to be together.

Cassidy gave him a curt nod. "Appreciate it. If I have my way, we'll be having another wedding before too long."

More laughter erupted from the other side of the room and Zane, Cassidy, Stefan, Lucian and Cristofor all turned to watch their women. Brothers in blood, they stood, bound by their ties of family, loyalty and love.

Cristofor shot Zane a pitying look. "We better go and help the women before they plan some elaborate celebration that will take months to organize."

Months! Zane couldn't wait months. Sophia wouldn't feel settled until this was done. He could probably wait a week, but no more. He ignored the men's laughter as he strode across the room toward Sophia and his future.

About the Author

N.J. Walters worked at a bookstore for several years and one day had the idea that she would like to quit her job, sell everything she owned, leave her hometown and write romance novels in a place where no one knew her. And she did. Two years later, she went back to the same bookstore and settled in for another seven years.

Although she was still fairly young, that was when the mid-life crisis set in. Happily married to the love of her life, with his encouragement (more like, "For God's sake, quit the job and just write!") she gave notice at her job on a Friday morning. On Sunday afternoon, she received a tentative acceptance for her first erotic romance novel, *Annabelle Lee*, and life would never be the same.

N.J. has always been a voracious reader of romance novels, and now she spends her days writing novels of her own. Vampires, dragons, time-travelers, seductive handymen and next-door neighbors with smoldering good looks all vie for her attention. And she doesn't mind a bit. It's a tough life, but someone's got to live it.

N.J. welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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